

By the Same Author
PRACTICAL AND PLEASANT
TAVENTS IN THE MEAVIN

MURDER AT THE BLACK CROOK

CECILE HULSE MATSCHAT



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MURDER AT THE BLACK CROOK

CHAPTER I

DAVID RAMSAY sat at his desk in the New Orleans office of the Department of Government Housing. His secretary, waiting patiently for him to finish checking the blueprint spread out before him, noticed with concern how the hollows had deepened recently in his brown cheeks and how dark and heavy were the shadows beneath his eyes.

"He's working too hard," she thought. "I'll be glad when this assignment is finished and we can return to Washington." There was no doubt in her mind that the capital was much to be preferred to New Orleans, even if the warm March sun in the latter city shone on the pink and white of blossoming azaleas instead of northern mud and slush. It couldn't be much fun for Mrs. Ramsay, either, spending most of her honeymoon alone in a hotel while her husband and his secretary ironed out bottlenecks that had developed on army projects. She hoped that this Major who was waiting to see the boss wouldn't prevent him from taking his wife to lunch. "If I were in Mrs. Ramsay's place . . ." She broke off her train of thought as David looked up inquiringly.

"Major Cassius Hart to see you," she said. "You know I never see anyone except by appointment. Miss Wilson. What does he want?"

"He has a letter of introduction to you from the Chief in Washington, but insists on delivering it in person." The secretary added, "I think the Major is in the Army Intelligence Service. A friend of mine pointed him out to me as he came out of the War Department building a week or so before we came down here. I remembered his face at once."

"Good girl," David said approvingly. "Well, I suppose I'll have to see him. Show him in."

The man who brushed past the secretary and entered the office was in his early forties, with intelligent dark eyes that swept over David in quick appraisal.

"Sorry to interrupt your work, Mr. Ramsay," he said, "but my business is official and couldn't wait."

David Ramsay, rising from his chair to greet the thin, tall man in olive drab with the gold maple leaves on his shoulders, realized why Honoré Wilson had remembered his name. Major Hart's austere countenance, dark and saturnine as some well-cast Mephistophelian character in a play, could not easily be forgotten by anyone who once had seen it. Even his inky-black eyebrows had the correct winged slant. "By contrast," David thought with amusement, "I look like a gawky schoolboy." He knew that his own tousled brown hair—so much lighter than his eyes—and his lanky frame never could be groomed to the distinction that fitted the Major like a well-tailored suit of clothes. But none of his thoughts showed in his manner.

"You have a letter for me from Mr. Strong, I understand," he said, shaking hands. He pushed a leather-covered chair close to the desk. "Sit here. That Flemish-oak monstrosity by the window is just for show and mighty uncomfortable."

Major Hart wasted no time in idle talk. He pulled the chair David had indicated closer to the young architect and handed him the letter of introduction. Then he selected a cigarette from the box placed at his elbow and tapped it idly on the back of his hand, watching David's face as he read.

"Clear?" he asked, as David laid the letter down on his desk.

"It puts my services entirely at your disposal, Major Hart," David said stiffly. "But it strikes me as strange that I wasn't consulted before being handed over to your department in this arbitrary manner." He added, "You don't object to my checking up on this?" His attitude said that he didn't care

whether the Major objected or not, and the latter observed this with a faint smile on his lips.

"Check up by all means. I would do the same were I in your place." The Major pulled a lighter from his pocket, flipped it open and applied the flame to the end of his cigarette.

David picked up the telephone on his desk and when his secretary answered said, "Ask the operator to get the Washington office, please. I want to speak to Mr. Strong. No one else will do." He hung up and leaned back in his chair, waiting, two spots of angry red flaming in his cheeks.

Major Hart thought, "Ramsay resents this deeply. He doesn't like me and I don't blame him. I wouldn't like being pushed around, either. But this is war and there isn't time to handle everyone with kid gloves." He sighed and dragged deeply on his cigarette. There had been more excitement and fun to his job when he had been roaming the country on varied assignments, fraught with danger as they were. Promotion had provided more security and now he sent out other men to their probable death while he stayed behind and checked the evidence they had accumulated. Not that he hadn't taken his share of risks! "Can't afford to lose you," the big Chief had told him when he'd remonstrated at being given a desk job. "But too many enemy agents are familiar with your looks." He'd been forced to concede that when an Intelligence man became known to the enemy his usefulness was pretty much over, so far as collecting evidence was concerned. So here he was, making an opponent of this nice young architect because there was no time to lose. He must work fast.

The 'phone rang sharply. David answered it and said, "Mr. Strong? Ramsay speaking. You were expecting me to call? Why—" He broke off and the Major heard the sound of a sharp, rasping voice coming through the line. The colour deepened in David's face but gradually his anger faded and interest took its place. "I see," he said finally. "I'll do my best." The voice on the line rapped out something else and David flushed again but this time with pleasure. "Thank

you, sir," he said, with a sidelong glance at Major Hart. "I'll try not to let you down." He put the 'phone back on the cradle and pushed it away from him.

"Satisfied?" Major Hart asked. At David's nod, "Before we go further with this matter would you kindly ask your secretary to send in Robert Brook as soon as he arrives? He should be here," glancing at his wrist-watch, "almost any moment now."

David gave the necessary instructions, then said to the Major, "If our talk is going to take long I must cancel a luncheon appointment."

"If it should be with Mrs. Ramsay, please don't." At David's raised eyebrows, "The success or failure of my plans depends as much upon her as upon you. I was about to suggest that you get in touch with her and ask her to join us here."

"My wife had never been to New Orleans before and I intended to take her to Antoine's for lunch. She is to meet me here at one o'clock. I don't see, however," he added slowly, "what she could have to do with your plans."

Major Hart said quickly, "I'll explain as soon as Mr. Brook comes. Then you can tell Mrs. Ramsay about the case and see how she feels about helping us on it. We can all lunch together at Antoine's, if that is satisfactory to you." He smiled understandingly, "It must be difficult to be on one's honeymoon and have so little time in which to enjoy it." Changing the subject abruptly, "Mr. Strong tells me he had difficulty in persuading you that your services were of greater value to the Housing Department than to the armed forces."

David said he didn't know that he had been persuaded. "I still regret not being on active duty. But I couldn't make the powers-that-be at Washington see it my way. They claimed my experience as an architect, since I had specialized in low-cost housing, was invaluable to them. So here I am. After the war I hope to—" He broke off as the secretary ushered into the room a stocky, middle-aged man dressed in a well-cut grey

business suit. His broad-ruddy face was pleasantly lined and the blue eyes that peered nearsightedly through the lenses of his old-fashioned gold-rimmed spectacles were keen but friendly. David liked Robert Brook at once.

"Isn't Mrs. Ramsay here?" he asked the Major, looking about the office. He settled himself in a chair and shielded the flame of a match for a second in his cupped hands before applying it to the cigar in his mouth. When it was drawing well, "She must be thoroughly coached in her part before she meets the family at Palmetto Walk."

David said, "I think I need some coaching, too. What is Palmetto Walk? And what is Mrs. Ramsay expected to do there?"

"I don't blame you for feeling muddled," Major Hart admitted. "Robert Brook is president of the Youba Oil Company, of which you may have heard. Palmetto Walk is his home, and you are to be his guest until we get this matter straightened out." He forestalled David's exasperated questions. "Let me do it in my own way, please. Just what do you know about the Youba Oil Company?"

"That it's the largest oil company in Louisiana with a huge tank farm just outside the city limits. I think 'tank farm' is the correct term for the place where oil is stored in tanks. The company's offices occupy an entire building that covers a down-town city block. The Youba people have subsidiary companies located throughout the Far East and were one of the first firms to inaugurate the system of exchanging men—that is, an outstanding man from the New Orleans or home office might be sent to the Java office and they in turn would send a man to Louisiana."

"Sort of a sabbatical year," Robert Brook interrupted. "Gives the men a chance to see something of the world as well as to learn how the other offices function. Occasionally we have an exchange employee from the field—a scout, for example—but not often."

"How did you come to know so much about the Youba

Oil Company?" the Major asked curiously. "Hear it since you came to New Orleans?"

David's respect for the Major's astuteness increased. He believed in leaving nothing to chance and didn't fully trust even the man recommended to him by one of Washington's most competent czars. David would have been willing to bet a considerable amount that his record had been thoroughly gone over by the FBI as well as by the Military Intelligence Service before he was approached by Major Hart. But then he remembered that he hadn't accepted the Intelligence man at his face value, either, and answered pleasantly that he knew a bit about the oil company before he left Washington. "One of our developments had some trouble in getting fuel oil because the war demands were so heavy. The Youba Company was among the firms which were unable to continue serving us."

Robert Brook said regretfully, "Unless something happens soon to clear up this business of oil being stolen from the tanks, I will have to turn the concern over to the government. Perhaps the army will have better luck."

"So that's the case I'm to be put on?" David asked. "No wonder Mr. Strong said to watch my step." He had read a great deal lately in the newspapers about hot oil—oil disposed of in excess of government quotas or stolen from the fields or tanks and sold to enemy agents. Most of it probably was used to refuel submarines from the so-called "milk cows" or mother ships that were infesting the Atlantic shipping lanes. To the Major he said, "The Axis subs are sinking so many of our cargo ships that they must be operating in great numbers. I suppose they are getting refuelled somewhere in this vicinity."

Major Hart frowned worriedly. "No doubt of it."

"The tank farm is, unfortunately, located very conveniently for the Axis. It's an easy matter for a tanker to come up the Mississippi at night and lay offshore for a day or so. Then our suspicions are not aroused, they can get their oil and,

gone with no one the wiser." Robert passed his hand tiredly over his lined face. "I don't suppose the submarines come up the river, although I guess they could."

"We are checking the registry now of all boats that apply for oil, Robert. But if they hold government orders and are under an Allied flag, it is not an easy matter to prove that they are other than they appear. An unscrupulous captain could easily divert half or all of his cargo, you know," the Major said.

"But I'm certain they are getting the oil direct from the tanks in some way we haven't thought of yet. So many thousands of barrels have disappeared that no other method would be feasible."

David said firmly, "I'm willing to take as many chances as you are, Major. But I can't allow my wife to have anything to do with this case. The Axis is getting desperate now. They don't care what they do to gain their ends. I won't have her mixed up in any spying capacity."

"I don't see how Mrs. Ramsay could possibly be in any danger," Major Hart assured him. "I would not ask her to help if I thought she would be. Your jobs are merely to act as unofficial observers while you are at Palmetto Walk. Just keep your ears and eyes open and report at once any odd conversations or bits of information that come your way, or any strange occurrences that you may notice. You will, naturally, show only a courteous interest in the tank farm or the oil business."

"Mrs. Ramsay is just recovering from a serious illness," David told him. He explained about their harrowing experiences in Okefenokee Swamp the previous year. "Not that stolen oil and an enemy spy ring is comparable to a murder case."

"It's a great deal more dangerous," Major Hart said quietly. "But more than our lives depends on our breaking up this Axis ring. We are faced with a serious oil shortage, and to continue losing thousands of barrels a day through some unexplained manner must stop at once. Mr. Strong said I

could depend on your help. And from what I have seen of you I agree that you are the man for the job."

"You have no line on the people who are the go-betweens for the enemy agents and whoever in the Youba Company is responsible for what is going on?" David had intended to ask why they were so insistent on putting a spy in Robert Brook's household, but he had changed his question upon meeting the man's eyes. Misery and panic had shown for a second in their depths, and a mute appeal for aid that he had not been able to resist. "He's afraid of what I am going to find out," David thought. "He thinks the traitor is a member of his family, but he doesn't want to face it by bringing it out in the open. Poor devil!"

Robert Brook said in answer to David's question, "No idea at all as to who is responsible. All the men's records have been checked and rechecked. Most of them have been with the company for years. Joe Burns, the engineer in charge of the pumps, is the son of one of our oil scouts. Jim Casey, our field superintendent, is his brother-in-law."

The 'phone rang. "Probably Mrs. Ramsay," said David as if he liked the sound of the words. The other men looked at each other and smiled approvingly. To the older man David's actions meant young love - to the hunter of men it meant an added safeguard for his plans. Who would suspect a bride and groom of being spies?

Andrea Ramsay was more than just a pretty girl with a slim figure that nevertheless contrived to be well rounded in all the proper places. There was character in her white, small face and intelligence in the great cornflower-blue eyes that studied the men curiously as they rose to their feet to greet her. She acknowledged the introductions, and brushed back a wind-blown red curl from her forehead as she smiled at her husband.

"Miss Wilson said to come right in, David. I didn't know you were busy."

"We were waiting for you. Major Hart wants us to help him on one of his cases." David told her about the stolen oil

and the importance of plugging the leak quickly. "Would you like to try it? Or would it make you nervous?"

"Why should it make me nervous? Of course we'll do it. But," Andrea said, looking questioningly at the Major, "why don't you use your regular operatives? David is an architect, not a detective. And there was nothing in my training as a medical research worker that would qualify me for a spy."

Robert Brook said uneasily, "I hate that word. Spy! It has such an odious sound."

The Major paid no heed to the remark. "Neither you nor your husband has to pretend to be other than you actually are—he a government housing expert and you his bride. My operatives would need to play a part, and that always entails risks that we cannot afford to take. It is imperative that we have someone in the Brooks's household whom we can trust. Mr. Strong assures me that Mr. Ramsay is that man."

Andrea Ramsay nodded thoughtfully. She looked at David, who was rolling a pencil idly back and forth between the palms of his hands. He seemed grave and anxious but met her glance squarely. She decided that he was satisfied they must go ahead with the assignment.

"Who discovered the oil was missing?" she asked.

"Joe Burns, our engineer at the tank farm. He went to fuel a tanker and discovered that he was pumping water instead of oil."

"Aren't the tanks inspected regularly, Mr. Brook?"

"Yes, but as oil floats on the water a casual inspection through the manhole at the top of the tank wouldn't prove that they were not filled with oil. As a matter of fact, they would look all right but might be three-quarters water."

"No chance of the feed lines from the fields to the tanks having been tampered with, I suppose?" David asked.

"We investigated that angle right away," Robert Brook assured him with a sigh. "Nothing so easy." He looked across at the Major. "I think we've covered about everything except the details of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's visit to

Palmetto Walk. Couldn't we finish our discussion at lunch, Cassius?"

Cassius! Andrea almost exclaimed aloud as she looked at the Major's austere dark face. "Yond Cassius hath a lean and hungry look; He thinks too much: such men are dangerous."

As if he had read her thoughts the Major's black eyes met Andrea's. "The name fits him," she decided uneasily. "He does have a lean and hungry look and he could well be dangerous. I suppose he's all right, though." She shrugged and dismissed the idea from her mind.

CHAPTER II

PALMETTO WALK faced Moss Street and Bayou St. John. The Bayou—extending from Lafitte Avenue to Lake Pontchartrain—had been an important waterway over which Indians and early settlers transported their wares to and from New Orleans. Once a canal, now filled in, it had permitted boats to penetrate as far as the ramparts of the town and magnificent plantation houses had been erected in its vicinity. Of the few still in existence, Palmetto Walk was the most impressive. It was a huge two-story pink-brick building with surrounding galleries railed with ornamental iron. The grounds were spacious and planted informally with azaleas, camellias, bamboos, and the palmettos that had given the plantation its name. A small walled garden contained rank-growing and exotic-appearing shrubs, and from this garden a winding stairway led to the second-story balcony. The pleasantly furnished room assigned to the Ramsays opened on to this balcony.

"It's smaller than most of the others," Robert Brook explained, "but I thought Mr. Ramsay might like to be able to

come and go without anyone else in the house being ~~the~~ wiser. However," glancing at Andrea, "if you'd prefer a larger room or one with a more modern bath, I'll ask Sally—my daughter—to make the arrangements."

"This is a lovely room," Andrea said with a smile. "And large enough for us."

"The bath is a nuisance, though. It's serviced from an old-style water-tank on the roof that often gets out of kilter. I've been intending to have it connected to the city water-main the same as the other baths in the house, but I haven't got round to it yet. So many other matters have occupied my mind lately. This room originally was used for storage and when Palmetto Walk was re-modelled it was overlooked somehow."

"I think it is charming," Andrea said warmly. She pushed open the long windows and stepped on to the balcony so that she could look down into the garden where the pale blooms of the vanilla orchid met and mingled on the whitewashed wall with the orange blossoms of the Mexican bignonia. "What is that white building in the corner?" she asked her host, who had joined her. "It has such lovely lines."

"That's the old slave quarters. I had it re-modelled into a little theatre about five years ago and encouraged the young people in the Youba Company to put on amateur plays." Robert added shyly, "I've always been interested in drama. But after father died there was the business to carry on, and with so many men depending on me for their livelihood, I didn't have much time to bother with a hobby. So I took up these," his gesture embracing the walled garden and the theatre. "My two loves."

"They're both interesting," Andrea said sincerely. "I suppose your company puts on revivals of old shows? Or do they try out new ones?"

"Revivals, mostly. Some of the company—they call themselves the Youba Players—have real talent. I hired a New York director for them and under her guidance they have improved amazingly."

Andrea raised her eyebrows in surprise. David, who had come to the door and was listening to the conversation, interrupted to ask curiously, "Isn't it unusual to have a woman director?"

Robert Brook laughed. "Everyone seems surprised at that. It is, in a way, but Erica Lange is a find. She's a well-known actress as well as a director. You probably don't remember but, in New York, in a recent revival of an old musical comedy—*The Black Crook*, she played the part of Stalacta—Queen of the Golden Realm. She was a sensation. We...?"

"I remember!" Andrea interrupted. "I do beg your pardon, Mr. Brook, but I'm so excited. I loved the play and I've always wanted to meet Miss Lange. Truly, David," turning to her husband, "she is the most beautiful creature. Like Brunhilde. How perfectly thrilling to find her here."

The men smiled at her childlike enthusiasm. Robert Brook said, with a pleased smile, "You have a treat coming, Mrs. Ramsay. The Youba Players are putting on *The Black Crook* the day after to-morrow for the benefit of the USO. The dress rehearsal is to-morrow night. Erica is directing, but she's also playing Stalacta."

"How nice! What part are you taking, Mr. Brook? Hertzog? That was the sorcerer's name, wasn't it?"

"The name of *The Black Crook*, yes. But Erica assigned that part to my son-in-law, Wade Harlow." For a second Andrea fancied a shadow fell over his face, then decided she had been mistaken as he continued with a small-boy grin, "I'm playing the Count—the rejected lover. Hope the Society for Improving the Morals of the Young, or whatever they call themselves, doesn't hear of it." In reply to their questioning looks, "Sally takes the part of Amina, the girl the Count wants to marry. I happened," he added whimsically, with a glance at his corpulent figure, "to be the only one available who was pompous enough for the Count."

David admired a man who could laugh at himself. He liked his host immensely, but that did not deter him from pursuing

his questioning. "Your son-in-law? I was under the impression that your daughter wasn't married. Major Hart referred to her as a child."

Robert Brook smiled faintly and shook his head. "Sally is young, but not the child that Cassius persists in considering her. She's twenty. But she isn't married and I hope she won't be thinking of it for some time to come. Wade was Judith's husband. She was my eldest daughter—seven years older than Sally. Judy and her second husband, Herbert Seldon, lived in Manila until his death a few months before the invasion. We haven't heard from Judy since the Japs marched in."

"I'm so sorry," Andrea said softly. She was thinking that no matter how fond he might be of Sally, her sister had been his favourite.

Robert Brook continued as if there had been no interruption of his story. "I want to say something to you about Judith. You're bound to hear a lot of gossip. Some of it will be true and most of it will be false. Anyone as lovely and wilful as Judy is bound to be talked about. I'd like you to know the truth." He cleared his throat and continued brusquely, "Four years ago this spring she ran away with the husband of her best friend, Ann Seldon. Ann and Wade, Judy's first husband, are both admirable people. Salt of the earth, you'd probably call them, although Wade . . . Well, no matter. But to anyone of Judith's volatile temperament they must have been boring at times. These good solid citizens so often are. Not that I'm defending either her or Herbert, who resembled Judy in many ways. They both liked lights and laughter."

Andrea nodded, and David said that she sounded attractive and that after all it was her own life and she had a right to live it.

Robert said that was the way Judith had figured. For himself, he felt if you made a bad bargain you should keep it. "Many persons don't agree with that, though."

"Everyone has to decide his own problems," David said gently.

Robert took off his glasses and held them up to the light, squinting thoughtfully at the lenses. He agreed with David about solving problems. "Ann consented at once to a divorce. I thought she was relieved at having things come to a head—Herbert had been so irresponsible for a long time—and he made a very fair settlement on her. He provided generously for the twins, Jack and Jill, too. They're six now; nice youngsters. Ann's brought them up well; for all she's so crazy over them, especially Jack." He hooked the bows of his glasses over his ears, and eyed them benevolently.

"Neither Ann nor Wade married again?" Andrea asked, seeing that he was waiting for her comment.

"No. Sometimes I wish Wade . . ." Robert Brook's voice trailed off uncertainly, as if he hesitated to say too much.

David changed the subject adroitly. "Could you spare me some time after dinner? I want to get a line on the members of the family, your clerks, and so on."

"We discussed all that this noon at the restaurant," Robert said, puzzled.

David shook his head. "Not in detail. I need a list, also, of all your employees in the home office."

"Well," Robert conceded doubtfully, "if you think it necessary."

"Nothing that I hear will have any meaning for me unless I know something of the background of the person or persons involved."

Robert Brook, apparently satisfied with the explanation, nodded agreement. "I have a small household, you know. The only other person living here beside Sally is Norman Mandel—son of a missionary in China. His father took care of me when I had malaria some years ago when Sally and I were travelling in the Far East. We became good friends. When he decided to send Norman to the States to finish his education he asked me to look after him. I saw the boy through Tulane and now he's learning the oil business. When he goes back home in a year

or so he'll be junior clerk in the new Manchurian Oil Distributing Company we're opening there."

" Sounds harmless," David said with a smile. " I didn't really expect to get a line on the guilty party so easily, you know. But we can't afford to overlook any chances."

Robert said, " Well, we'd better get on with it. It's getting late. There's my assistant, Steve Carstair—he's from the Far East too. I don't see how you could suspect him ; his father was my best friend. Then there's Slim Boone, my personal secretary, and Janice Lannon, assistant to the timekeeper : her brother is Lawrence Lannon, the novelist. Both Jan and Lawrence have travelled a lot. Warren Sand has access to all of the records. Then there are the minor clerks, and my personal servants—I'll vouch for all of them and they are not to be bothered." His bushy brows drew down over his keen eyes. His intention of going further into this was cut short by the chiming of a clock : seven deep notes. " We'll postpone the rest until later." He moved briskly to the door, obviously relieved at the reprieve. " Come to the study about nine and we'll finish the list."

" Thanks," David said, holding open the door for his host. " Who beside yourself and the Major know I was put on this case ? "

Robert Brook said slowly, " Not another soul but the four of us." In fact, only one other person knows there is a case. I'm not in the habit of discussing indiscriminately such serious matters."

David flushed at the implied rebuke, but he asked quietly, " And that person ? "

" My fiancée, Erica Lange." Robert Brook bowed pleasantly, and went out of the room, closing the door softly behind him.

CHAPTER III

DAVID said ruefully, "I certainly dropped a brick that time." He looked uncertainly at his wife. They had been discussing the conversation with their host while they dressed for dinner.

"You couldn't possibly have known that Erica and Mr. Brook were engaged," Andrea said soothingly. "And even if you had, you couldn't have known that he'd confided in her. Many men never tell even their wives anything about their business, particularly secrets." She slid a white piqué dinner dress over her head and fluffed up the organdy frills that outlined the square-cut neck and the bracelet sleeves.

"I never heard of her until I came here. You said she's like Brunhilde. Did you mean that literally?"

"Yes. Can't think of any other comparison that describes her so well." Andrea leaned over and fastened the buckles of her green kid slippers. "What happened to Mrs. Brook? Divorced?"

"Died. When the children were small, I think." David pulled on his dinner coat and admired the set of it across his flat shoulders. "Brook seemed cut up about Judith, didn't you think?"

"Very." Andrea finished applying her lipstick. "He minds the disgrace of her running away worse than her death--or her disappearance to put it more accurately."

"What makes you say that?" David asked curiously. "Nothing he said would permit you to draw that conclusion. He defended her vigorously throughout." Andrea had an uncanny faculty of hitting the nail on the head when it came to analyzing people, and he always was at a loss to understand how she arrived at her convictions.

Andrea nodded. "That's it," she said. As David still looked unconvinced. "Methinks he doth protest too much." She gathered up purse, cigarette case, and handkerchief from the dressing-table and trailed her crisp skirts over the green and

white hooked carpet to the door. "He's very proud," she added as an afterthought.

David snapped out the lights. Although it was still early, only eight o'clock, dusk had settled heavily over the garden and filtered in faintly through the partly drawn curtains at the head of the winding stairs that led to the loggia.

Andrea liked old houses, old wood, and old furniture. Palmetto Walk was plentifully supplied with all of these. The balustrade was of mulberry wood, polished by the countless numbers of hands that had slid down its smooth surface. She touched it appreciatively as she descended the last step and began to cross the black-and-white tiled floor of the loggia.

Palmetto Walk differed from the typical plantation type house in that there was no central hall. The double wooden doors of the severely plain façade of the bayou front of the ground floor opened directly on a glass-enclosed colonnade—which Robert Brook termed the loggia. The upper and lower floor plans of the dwelling were identical: three rooms across and two deep. The servants' wing of one story apparently had been added lately, probably after the slave quarters had been remodelled into the little theatre. The windowless west wall of the quarters bounded one side of the garden.

Jason, the elderly Negro butler who had carried up the baggage when the Ramsays arrived earlier that day, hastened to open the white-panelled door nearest to the stairs. He bowed grandly. "Cocktails in the drawing-room, Sir and Madam."

Andrea hesitated a second on the threshold. The gracious gold and ivory room appeared filled with people. Although the night was so warm, a fire burned on the hearth under the marble mantel. Robert Brook, his red face made even more ruddy by the glow of the flames, was half-turned away from them, talking with such intense absorption to a blonde woman in a rose brocaded dress, sitting on the blue damask sofa at right angles to the fireplace, that he didn't notice the Ramsays' entrance. He was automatically preparing cocktails in a huge silver shaker.

David asked under his breath, "Erica Lange?"

Andrea nodded, but before she had time to comment a thin, very dark girl in a yellow cotton gown rose hurriedly from the floor where she'd been sitting with a group of young people listening to a news broadcast. She walked swiftly and gracefully, and Andrea felt certain even before the girl introduced herself that she was Sally Brook.

"Do come and meet the others." Sally slid her arm in friendly fashion through Andrea's and drew her across the room. She smiled as David had to bend his head to hear what she was saying. "They do make a racket, don't they?" The shrieks, the laughter, the blast of the radio formed a medley over which it was hard to converse. "Such a joke on me," Sally went on. "Dad said he was entertaining a business friend and his wife. Of course, I thought you'd be a thousand and let you rest until dinner. If I'd known . . ."

David asked, with a significant nod towards the couple by the fire, "Do you think that's kind to your father's friends?"

"Dad wouldn't care if he heard," Sally said carelessly. Evidently the friendliest of relations existed between them. "He's a good sport. And I didn't include Erica: she's a darling."

Sally made the introductions so swiftly that the Ramisays had difficulty in sorting out one guest from the other. David stayed for a few words with Erica and Robert Brook, then Sally took him away again. Andrea, escorted by Norman Mandel, seated herself on the wide window-seat at the bayou-garden end of the room. The smell of expensive tobacco and fine liquor mingled with the scent of the night blooming flowers outside the open window. She searched her mind for an opportunity to guide the conversation tactfully towards personalities.

"Do you enjoy parties, Mr. Mandel?"

Norman's fair skin flushed brick red. His eyes met Andrea's friendly ones and some of the awkwardness fell from him. "I like them terribly. But I'm not much of a success socially." He added frankly, "You're the first girl outside of Sally that

I've been able to talk to without stammering all over the place. I never can think of anything to say to them."

Andrea said sympathetically, "I know. It's harder, too, if one has been brought up in a foreign country."

His face brightened and he turned to her impulsively, all his shyness forgotten, "Oh, yes. That's true. They all," with a wave of his hand towards the group where David and Sally were holding court, "seem to think I'm a foreigner myself. I'm an American, you know, even if I wasn't born here. Mr. Brook—Uncle Robert, he wants me to call him—has been wonderful. There is nothing he wouldn't do for me. He even offered to place me permanently here in Youba Oil." His face darkened, looked tired, older, "but I can't stay. There's father . . . he's not so young any more. I would hate to disappoint him."

"Couldn't he come to America? Join you here?"

Norman shook his head. "He's lived all his life in China. His interests are there. Mother was killed when the Japanese took over Manchuria. The Chinese resisted, and so . . . Father's never got over it." He turned impulsively to Andrea and she thought how very young he seemed in his earnestness. "She was lovely, Mrs. Ramsay. Her hair was bright as the sun and she dressed all in white. When I was little I used to think Mother looked like a queen. Miss Lange makes me think of her." He glanced down the long room to where Erica, her face upturned to Robert Brook, was sitting.

"I don't remember my mother at all." Andrea was the one to break the poignant silence that had fallen between them. "Tell me, who is the distinguished-looking, tall, grey-haired man talking to Sally?"

Norman's glance followed her own. "Lawrence Lannon, the novelist. Would you like me to bring him over?" He rose reluctantly from his seat.

Andrea restrained him with a touch on his arm. "I'll meet him later, I'm sure. Just now I'm enjoying our talk too much to end it."

Norman was pleased. "Lawrence used to be very popular . . . his books, I mean," he volunteered eagerly. "But since he lost the lawsuit he hasn't written much."

After a shrewd glance at his face Andrea decided that Norman wasn't being consciously malicious. Like other callow youth, he merely wanted to impress an older, married woman with his knowledge. So she asked idly, "What suit was that?"

"I don't know the details. Over some property, I think. He's never forgiven Wade for winning it against him, but Wade was just starting to practise and I suppose it seemed like a chance to make a big splash. Everybody in New Orleans took sides and it created a great deal of trouble, even among members of the family. It really should not be held against him, though, do you think?"

Andrea quickly sorted out Norman's meaning. "Against Wade? No, I suppose not," she admitted doubtfully.

"Someone would have taken the case," Norman said reasonably. "Warren thinks Wade decided he might as well be the one to get the money and the publicity. He heard him practically tell Uncle Robert so. Wade was annoyed because Lawrence pretended not to understand how he felt about it. 'When business comes in the door friendship goes out of the window,' Wade told Uncle Robert. Paraphrasing the old saw above love and money."

"Who is Warren?" Andrea asked idly, wondering if all this conversation was worth the time and effort.

"Warren Sand. That's he coming in the door now. Wade's with him."

The ginger-coloured hair of the tall lad, who preceded the dapper figure Norman had indicated as Wade Harlow, was the only distinctive thing about him. Otherwise he was just a gangling youth with a wide mouth now stretched in a friendly grin. But Wade Harlow was so eminently correct—from the top of his smoothly-brushed dark head to the toes of his polished shoes—that most people would spare him a second glance. His

tiny black moustache was as neat and trim as its owner, and although Andrea was too far away to see clearly, she would have wagered any money that his lashes were as long and curling as those of any pretty girl. A temperamental woman, such as her father had made Judith out to be, might well come to dislike his correctness. "I'd throw something at him," Andrea decided, comparing most unfavourably Wade's effeminate good looks with David's lean brown ugliness.

Jason announced dinner. The guests began to drift in groups of two's and three's towards the loggia. The front rooms seemed almost a part of it, so closely were they blended together by potted palms and flowering plants, but Andrea noticed them only indifferently. Her mind was occupied with wondering if David had found out anything of interest at the same time that she replied yes and no, in what she hoped were the proper places, to Norman's questions. Halfway down the long room her way was barred by a tall blond man with skin tanned to the colour and consistency of old leather and impudent laughing greenish eyes.

"Mrs. Ramsay? I'm Steven Carstair. Uncle Robert says I'm to have the pleasure."

"That's not fair, Steve," Norman protested. "Mrs. Ramsay is to be my dinner partner. I asked Uncle Robert if I might sit beside her." He added accusingly, "I saw you whispering to Sally. I'll bet you got her to change the place cards."

Steve said with a grin, "Well, Uncle Robert would have given her to me if he'd known I was to be here."

Norman cast Steve Carstair a sullen look and walked away without a word. Andrea was disturbed by the bitterness she saw in his eyes.

"You looked so sweet and so bored, sitting down there with the dusk behind you. I could see one huge star through the window. It looked as if it were caught in your hair." Steve's warm hand closed over her arm just above the elbow. "I just had to rescue you."

"From what?" Andrea asked coolly, disengaging her arm

from his grasp. She resented his perfunctory disposal of Norman, his assurance that she would welcome his company. And Norman was too old to be treated like a child. He must be all of twenty-one.

"You're annoyed," Steve said regretfully. "I'm sorry." He sounded genuinely upset. "I'll ask Sally to change the card back again when we reach the table."

Andrea said lightly, "Nonsense. That would only call attention to him and he'd be more embarrassed than ever. He's awfully young, you know." She thought vaguely that her attitude might be inconsistent, but she realized that she didn't want to exchange the company of this charming sophisticated man of the world for Norman's immature chatter.

"You're as generous as you are lovely," Steve Carstairs said in a low voice.

"What is that room?" Andrea asked as they strolled past a half-open door through which she caught a glimpse of book-lined walls, huge maroon leather-covered chairs, and a deep-piled rug of indigo blue. "The library?"

"Uncle Robert's study." Steve guided her skilfully round a group of guests who had stopped to play with Sally's black Scottie, Bimbo, as alert and vivid in his personality as his mistress. "He likes it because it has no windows, nothing to distract him when he's working. The library is back of the dining-room." He laughed suddenly. "Do you know, I can't get used to this house, although I've almost lived here for the past two years. From the drawing-room you enter the morning-room; Uncle Robert's study connects with his bedroom—there's a bath between; you have to go through the dining-room to get into the library, unless you follow the loggia round to the side entrance."

"I always thought they called these roofed-over walks colonnades," Andrea said idly, wondering what David was finding so interesting to talk about with Sally. He hadn't once looked to see how she was getting on—not that it was necessary, but even so . . . Sally Brook was prettier than she

had thought, with bright colour flushing her cheeks after the tussle with Bimbo. Her black curls were piled high on her small head and her mouth was a vivid crimson against the old ivory of her skin. "How old is she?"

"About a hundred and fifty." Steve cast a quizzical glance at Andrea, wondering at her interest in the age of the plantation house ; he hadn't noticed that she was looking at Sally as she asked the question. "And this really is a colonnade. Uncle Robert glassed it in when he remodelled ; he has called it a loggia ever since."

Andrea smiled, but didn't enlighten him that her interest at that particular moment was centred in Sally. She had remembered suddenly that Robert Brook had only that afternoon said that Sally was twenty. "Wool gathering," she reminded herself sternly, and set about to correct that condition. She'd never learn anything of value if she thought only of herself. "Is Sally fond of Erica?"

"Very, I think." They sauntered up to where Robert Brook and Erica Lange were standing, and as Andrea watched the greeting between the two men she decided that a real affection existed between them, also.

"Got away from work after all, I see," Robert said jovially. "Glad to see you. Ought to do it more often. Jason lay a place for you?" At Steve's nod, he turned to Andrea with a warm smile, "Taking care of you, is he? Well, you're in good hands. He's a scamp, but entertaining."

Erica said lazily, "Don't pay any attention to him, Mrs. Ramsey. He loves to tease." Her warm smile, the caressing hand she laid on his arm convinced Andrea that this was a love match. The smile faded. She said in a flat voice, "Oh! There's Wade Harlow. And Janice Lannon."

Andrea noticed the change in her uneasily. More cross-currents. She saw Erica greet Wade with a cold nod and the smile she gave to Janice was frosty. But Janice didn't seem to notice, or perhaps she was too taken up with Wade to care.

It was the first opportunity Andrea had had of studying the

novelist's young sister. She felt a wave of pity sweep her—the girl seemed so frail, so vulnerable. She was weak, too, where her affections were concerned, for there was no denying that she wore her heart on her sleeve for everyone to read. The soft rounded chin, the shy brown eyes, the fair smooth hair brushed back from her wide white brow made a charming picture, but not the picture of a girl able to fight and win her battles. "Why on earth does she hang on Wade's every word, let him see how thrilled she is just to be noticed?" Andrea reflected crossly. "Most likely it bores him to death. Women have certainly spoiled him. It must have been a jolt to his self-esteem when Judith walked out." She felt she could applaud Judith's effort. "I could shake Janice. Maybe it would put some sense into her."

At the dinner table, Andrea slid into the chair Jason held for her. She was on her host's left; Erica sat on his other side. She could not help but glance down the long crystal- and silver-laden table to see where David was. His brown head was bent close to Sally's black one and they were deeply engrossed in each other. Feeling Robert's eyes upon her, Andrea said the first thing that came into her head.

"Is Warren Sand in love with Janice?"

"Yes, he is," Robert Brook said in surprise. "How did you know?" He answered his own question. "By the way he's staring at her, I suppose. But I'm afraid Warren is out of luck, poor lad. He's followed her around ever since she was a tiny tot and they played house together on the banks of the bayou. But Jan's never cared about anyone but Wade Harlow."

Feeling like a female Paul Pry, Andrea asked, "Was Wade terribly in love with Judith?" She added impulsively because she liked Robert Brook so much and didn't want him to have a bad opinion of her, "I hope you understand why I'm asking all these personal questions."

He patted her hand gently, as he might that of a child. "Of course I understand. I'm really an understanding kind of

person. You need never be afraid to come to me if there is anything that worries you, if you are bothered about anything you learn." He looked again at Janice Lannon, so interested in Wade that the entrée the butler placed before her lay unnoticed on her plate. "Jan took Wade's marriage very hard. But she never had a chance once Wade met Judy. He never looked at another woman after his marriage, I'd stake my soul on that. He was crazy about her."

"He doesn't seem the type," Andrea ventured.

"You never saw Judy," her father said gently. "Lately I've noticed that Jan and Wade are spending a lot of time together. Perhaps . . ."

He left the thought unfinished, but Andrea decided that he would be pleased rather than otherwise if Jan and Wade married. She dismissed the matter from her mind and turned her attention to the dinner, which was excellent. It had progressed from the red snapper through the gumbo, with its shrimps and oysters, to the fowl when Steve Carstair attracted Andrea's attention by asking if she cared for flowers.

"These are moth orchids," Steve said, pulling towards him a low bowl filled with waxy blooms. "From China. Lovely, aren't they?" snapping one from the parent stem and handing it to her.

"Beautiful," Andrea said sincerely, sliding its stem through the clasp of the emerald clip David had given her for a wedding present. "But I never think of orchids as growing in China."

"China has hundreds of gorgeous orchids," Norman interrupted. He was sitting beside Janice. "But that orchid isn't native to China. It's indigenous to the Philippines." His eyes were very bright and two red spots glowed on his cheekbones as he leaned forward challengingly. He intended to get his own back at Steve with a vengeance.

Steve grinned good-naturedly at the chaffing that followed Norman's remark. "The kid's right," he admitted. "The moth does belong to the Philippines but I've picked it wild so often in China that I always associate it with that country."

Andrea leaned back in her chair and listened to the hum of chatter about her. Everyone appeared to be having a good time. David caught her eye and smiled at her, a quick flashing smile that for a second drew them close in a warm intimacy. Then he turned back to Sally.

Across the table Wade was chatting with Janice. He broke off a single moth orchid bloom and made a ceremony of fastening it among the smooth braids of fair hair wound about the girl's small head. She flushed and reached up a slim hand to touch it caressingly, saying something so low that Andrea, shamelessly eavesdropping, could not catch it.

Evidently Robert Brook did, for he broke in quickly to cover Jan's embarrassment. "Wade, are you intending to work here to-night? My secretary, Slim, says you asked him to lock your brief-case in the study safe. I'm using the study later, so . . ."

"To-morrow, Dad, if you're not using it yourself. If so, I can use the library. Judge Taylor is going over some papers with me. I had expected to meet him here to-night, but Mrs. Taylor 'phoned and said he had gone to bed with one of his bad headaches. The papers are so important I didn't dare leave them out of the safe." He glanced uncertainly about the table, at the interested and listening faces turned his way. "They form the basis of what may be the biggest case I'll ever handle. I wanted the Judge's opinion before I take any action."

"There's lots of room in the safe, son. Sally knows the combination in case you want to get at the papers when Slim or I are not around."

"Where did the orchids come from?" Wade asked to change the subject.

"I brought them to Sally," Steve said with a smile.

Erica Lange remarked wistfully, "The hills of Luzon must be white with them now. I remember . . ." She broke off abruptly.

In the silence that followed Erica's broken reminiscence, Andrea had heard the slam of the heavy doors in the loggia and

Jason's startled cry of greeting. High heels clicked sharply on the tiles and almost at once a girl appeared in the doorway.

Even at first glance it was evident that she was an older, more assured edition of Sally with a seductive beauty her younger sister could never hope to equal. She wore a jade green suit and a tiny matching hat set back on her blue-black curls.

"Judy!" Robert Brook rose slowly to his feet, his napkin falling unheeded from his hand.

"Dad!" She threw herself into his arms and buried her face on his breast.

The man's big hand smoothed the silky hair. His lips quivered as he looked about at the people watching him sympathetically. He tried to joke as he held the daughter he had thought lost closer to him. "My little prodigal," he said gently. "Sally," to the white-faced girl who sat at the end of the table, "Sally, we'll have to kill the fatted calf."

Andrea heard the note of command in his voice, and wondered.

CHAPTER IV

THE rest of that evening was like a bad dream, a nightmare from which Andrea tried in vain to awaken. Everyone played at cross purposes and there was tension in the air, more than Judith's return would seem to warrant.

After her first emotional greeting to her father, Judith had withdrawn from his arms and stood smiling tremulously at the rest of the group. Wade Harlow and Lawrence Lannon went to her at once. She replied pleasantly to their welcoming remarks, her glance flickering as impersonally over Wade as over the novelist. "They might be casual acquaintances," Andrea thought, "instead of a former husband and a lifelong friend.

Probably lover," she amended, noting the hungry manner in which Lawrence's intent gaze followed Judith's every move.

Sally noticed Lawrence's complete absorption in Judith, also. She turned as white as Andrea's frock : even her lips lost their rich natural colour, the brilliant lipstick she affected standing out like a garish streak across her face. She made no move to go to her sister until Judith spoke.

" Glad to see me, little sister ? "

" Of course, Judy," she said chokingly. " The shock made me lose my voice." But it must have been apparent to the least observant onlooker that it was lip service only. Andrea, watching with astonishment and dismay, saw the younger girl's kiss barely brush her sister's cheek. Sally turned abruptly and mechanically introduced the guests who had not known Judith Seldon.

Judith's greeting to Erica Lange and the Ramsays was polite, disinterested. But she turned her great black eyes on Steve appraisingly. " Steven Carstair ? Of course, Dad's assistant." She laid her slim white hand in his big brown one. " He raved about you so much in his letters that I really was jealous. As if listening to Herbert's hymn of praise wasn't enough ! "

" Herbert ? "

" My husband, Herbert Seldon." Judith's eyes widened at his surprise. " Surely you haven't forgotten him so quickly." She was still studying him intently, a slight frown wrinkling her brow.

" No, of course not. How could I ? I was merely astonished that he should have mentioned me at all."

Judith shrugged charmingly. " But he did. Why, I don't know. Proof of your fascination, perhaps," with an impish lift of her brows. " But then Herbert's reasons for doing things were beyond analysis. Didn't you find them so, Ann ? " turning abruptly to her one-time friend.

Ann Seldon, who had come in late and with a smiling word of apology had slipped into the vacant chair between David and

Warren Sand, looked up and smiled faintly. "I never tried to analyze his whims, Judy. I considered it a waste of time."

Score one for Ann, Andrea thought with amusement. She waited to see what would happen next. But Robert Brook put an end to the episode by solicitously escorting his daughter to her room, with Sally trailing along obediently.

Judith did not reappear that evening, but this seemed to accentuate the tension. Sally returned to the dining-room after a few minutes, saying merely that Judith had been ill and was so exhausted by her journey that Aunty Lou, their old mammy, was putting her to bed. Robert Brook begged his guests to excuse him as he would stay with Judith until she slept.

Café brûlot was served in the loggia. The burning brandy high-lighted the shadows that lingered in the palm-decked corners: the scent of spices, coffee, and citrus peel mingled with the perfume of wistaria, azaleas, and night-blooming lilies. The guests settled themselves comfortably, sipped their drinks, and discussed the latest episode in the Judith Harlow Seldon serial.

David had led Andrea to one of the softly cushioned love seats, and busily piled pillows behind her back. She stopped him finally, her slim fingers curled about his wrist. "Darling! I'm not an invalid."

Her husband laughed and sat down beside her. The smile still lingered in his brown eyes as he watched his wife lean her vivid head against the green cushions. "Nice of Brook to fix up all these nests," looking appreciatively at the cloistered nook.

"What?" Andrea asked, her thoughts still on Judith. "David," leaning forward in her earnestness to convince him, "why was Judith so surprised to see Steve Carstair? And what made him act so queer?"

"Was she? I didn't notice it. As for Steve, he acted like any man meeting a very pretty woman."

Andrea said positively, "Nonsense! I was watching closely, because you're not observant, no matter what the Major says. Not like a woman, anyway. Steve turned the funniest colour

—sort of greenish. He'd have been as white as Sally if he hadn't been burned so black by the sun that he couldn't."

"I agree about Sally," David said calmly. "But as far as Steve is concerned, your imagination is running away with you. He never met Judith before." He stretched out his legs and relaxed against the cushions, the matter being settled once and for all so far as he was concerned.

Andrea dropped the subject but she wasn't convinced. Mentally she filed the incident away in a corner of her mind. One of these days she'd take it out and examine it carefully to find out why Steve was upset over Judith's home-coming, and why Judy appraised him so critically. Sally's conduct needed investigating, too.

After Jason had refilled their coffee cups, David remarked lazily, "Wade never turned a hair, did he?" It was not a question.

"Wade!" Andrea dismissed him with a disdainful sniff. "The one I'm interested in now is Erica. Look at her over there talking to Sally. She looks poisonous."

David followed his wife's glance and sat up, frowning. He half rose, wondering if he should go to Sally's assistance, but Andrea shook her head warningly and he sat down again and waited to see what would happen.

Sally was backed up against the wall, gazing unbelievingly at Erica as if she had never seen her before.

Even in the softly lighted loggia it was easy to see that Erica's fair skin was flushed crimson. She gripped the back of the chair beside her with such force that the knuckles of her hands stood up in white hard ridges. "I won't put up with it any longer, Sally," she was saying in her husky voice; it carried easily to all corners of the loggia. The hum of voices died down as the guests turned curiously to listen. "I'm going to tell your father so the minute I see him. I've taken all I can stand."

Sally put out her hand and touched Erica's arm appealingly. "Please!"

Erica paid no attention to Sally's gesture. "Something has to be done. Somebody has to take the lead in a situation like this." She gave the chair she was holding a vicious thrust away from her and it skidded on the marble tiles and overturned with a clatter. Her voice rose sharply, "I'll murder the swine!"

For a second there was a shocked silence, then the hum of voices rose unnaturally loud as the guests tried politely to relieve the awkwardness of the situation. The sound drowned Sally's reply. As soon thereafter as they could, most of the group departed, reminding Sally gaily of the dress rehearsal called for the following night.

David and Andrea retired shortly. Andrea, lying wide awake and deeply troubled in the huge bed beside him, thought he was asleep when suddenly he sat upright.

"Where did Steve go after dinner? I didn't see him in the loggia when we were having coffee, did you?"

"He wasn't there," Andrea replied briefly.

"And Wade?"

"He followed Steve. They both left the house when Jason brought in the coffee." Andrea heard David sigh and asked, "Why, dear? Is it important?"

"It might be. I didn't understand that scene between Erica and Sally, either. Find out what they were quarrelling about, Andy."

"I'll try," his wife agreed dubiously. "But don't count on it. I can't just walk up and ask them, you know. And Sally wasn't angry. She was astonished."

In spite of her resolve to put the incidents of the day from her mind, Andrea rested badly. David was still sleeping when she awakened and she slid out of bed without arousing him. The carpet felt soft to her bare feet and she padded across the room to the window.

It was still early and few of the household were astir. In the garden Jason was watering the flowers, the hose trailing behind him like a long black snake. Looking up at the heavy

clouds which obscured the sun, Andrea thought he might have saved himself the work: it would surely rain, and that hard before long. She was tempted to shake David awake, ask him about some of the things that were troubling her, but decided against it, poured herself a drink from the carafe on the night table, pulled down the blinds and crawled back into bed.

When she awakened the second time the first thing she heard was the steady pound of rain on the window panes. Jason did his work in vain after all, she thought drowsily. Then realized where she was and really awoke. She put out her hand to David but his place was vacant. Illogically panic-stricken, she was about to go in search of him when she heard him whistling cheerily in the bathroom and a second later he put his head around the door jamb and grinned at her.

“Sleepyhead!”

Andrea stretched and yawned. “What time is it?”

“About nine o’clock. Brook went down about ten minutes ago.”

“How do you know it was Mr. Brook?”

“I heard him talking to Erica.”

They smiled at each other. David said, “I’m starved. Get up and let’s have some breakfast.”

“We could breakfast up here,” Andrea suggested. She felt strangely reluctant to face the rest of the household.

“Best not,” David said. “We might miss something important. I’ll have to see Brook in his office . . . no, that won’t do, either. Well, I’ll get along with the history of the employees I already have. It’s pretty sketchy but will have to do. The Major can amplify it if he wants to.”

Andrea slid hurriedly out of bed and bathed and dressed so quickly she was ready almost as soon as David. At the foot of the stairs they saw Steve Carstair just coming into the loggia. He nodded a smiling good morning.

“Had breakfast yet? No? Come along and keep me company.”

Steve pulled off his wet rainproof and dropped it carelessly

on a chair. He smoothed back his wet hair and wiped the rain from his face with a clean linen handkerchief before leading the way to the breakfast-room—a charming place with pale grey walls and crisp lemon curtains—that evidently had been built as an afterthought at the same time as the servants' wing. The effect of the rain, still falling monotonously, was offset by the fire blazing brightly on the hearth.

Erica and Robert Brook were just starting breakfast. Andrea chuckled to herself as she visualized how they had passed the time since coming downstairs a half-hour or more ago ; she well remembered her own courtship. Nothing of what she was thinking showed in her face, however, as she responded to her host's cordial greeting. Erica looked up, smiled, but said nothing. She was drinking black coffee and ignoring the bacon and egg on her plate. Andrea decided she was dieting.

"Sleep well?" Robert said finally, motioning Jason to remove his grapefruit.

"Yes, indeed," David answered for them both.

Andrea ate her melon placidly, and wondered where Sally was, if she were in the habit of sleeping late, and if Norman Mandel already had left for the office. She hoped not, as she wanted a chance to make up to him for Steve's rudeness of the previous night. But the entrance of Sally and Norman together cut short her musings.

Sally patted her father on top of his grey head and greeted the rest of them pleasantly. She cast a quick inquiring glance at Erica, which the latter did not seem to see.

But Norman, after a smile for Andrea and Erica, addressed himself to Steve. "You here again?" he asked rudely. "Should think Uncle Robert would charge you board."

Steve grinned at Norman's grouch. He rose and kicked the log farther into the fireplace, then resumed his seat and passed his cup for the second time to Erica, who was pouring the coffee. With his eyes on Sally's vivid face, Steve ignored Norman and spoke to the girl, "Lazy bones. Letting Erica take over your job."

Andrea wondered if there was a veiled warning in his chaffing remark. But he continued in the same vein before she could decide.

"This is better coffee than they serve at the Roosevelt, Uncle Robert. I can't bear to miss a meal here."

Norman muttered something under his breath, and Robert Brook said amiably, "Now, boys!" And to Steve, "I don't see why you don't move in here with us. You know you'd be welcome."

"Thanks, Uncle Robert," Steve said gratefully. "Maybe I will." His eyes sought Sally's for confirmation of the invitation, but she said nothing.

Norman threw down his napkin and with a churlish goodbye, left the room. Robert Brook finished his breakfast and left also.

After they had gone the others settled back and relaxed somewhat. It could have been very pleasant and homelike, with the rain blinding the windows and the fire crackling on the hearth, if it weren't for that queer undercurrent. Andrea thought again how silly it was to think that any of these intelligent, well-bred people could be guilty of treason—and then remembered that not all of the household or of Robert Brook's confidential assistants looked upon the United States as their country, although all were Americans. She was about to ask Sally if Judith was feeling well this morning when Steve questioned calmly :

"Judy coming down this morning?" He might have known her for years, instead of having met her last night for the first time.

Sally shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. One never knows with her. Dad said she's pretty fagged."

"How did she get away?" Steve asked curiously. "I thought the Japs had all the whites put in concentration camps."

"She left with two or three other Americans in a small boat. They were picked up by a navy vessel and taken to

Australia. Judy was ill when they landed and in the mix-up her cable to Dad was lost."

"I see," Steve muttered. His tone was so strange that Sally and the others glanced at him expectantly, but he didn't elaborate on his remark.

After an awkward pause Andrea changed the subject. "Where does Mr. Harlow live, Sally?"

"At the Roosevelt Hotel, the same as Steve. He moved there shortly after Judy left. Dad asked him to stay here with us, but he thought it might look odd after their divorce. Wade believes in observing all the conventions." Sally smiled faintly. "He might as well live here, though, he's about so much. Judge Taylor and he come here often to work in the study when Dad isn't using it. Other times they use the library." She passed the cream to Steve, then resumed, "We are apt to fall over them at any time of the day or night."

"Don't they have an office?" David lazily interposed.

Steve chuckled. "Sure they do. The swellest in town. But Mrs. Taylor rides hard on the Judge so closely that he works here every chance he gets."

"You mean she interrupts him at his office all the time?" Andrea asked.

Her scandalized voice made the others shout with laughter. Erica said, wiping the tears from her eyes, "You evidently don't need to worry about that problem, Mr. Ramsay."

"Mrs. Judge Taylor has lots of errands for her husband to do," Steve said with a grin. "Or for one of the ladies of the Garden Club of which she is president. The Judge never knows when to expect her. It's the uncertainty that gets him down."

Andrea joined in the laughter. "Is she jealous?"

Sally spread her hands helplessly. "Goodness knows. What is it, Jason?" as the butler appeared carrying a portable 'phone which he plugged in and set before his mistress.

"It's Mr. Wade, Miss Sally."

"Thanks, Jason. Excuse me, please." And speaking into the 'phone. "That you, Wade?" She listened to the mum-

bling noises coming through the transmitter and Andrea tried to read her expression, then was annoyed with herself for the interest she took lately in other people's affairs. Even the fact that she was supposed to find out things didn't make her any happier, make her feel any less the sneak.

Sally ended the conversation rather abruptly. "Sorry, Wade. I'd like to make it, but I can't. Mrs. Ramsay and I have other plans." She made a little face at Andrea, who smiled back. "Do you want your brief-case? I can send it down to you by Mr. Ramsay. I'm sure he won't mind."

"I'll take it, Sally," Steve offered.

Sally hung up and Jason carried away the 'phone. "Thanks, Steve. But Wade says not to bother. The Judge won't be able to do any work to-day, as he is studying his part in *The Black Crook*." She laughed with affectionate amusement at the Judge's doings. "He's so in earnest about it, the old darling!"

"Judge Taylor sounds like a busy man." David passed his cup for more coffee.

Sally agreed. "Taylor and Harlow are the busiest lawyers in the city. They handle most of the big cases." She frowned thoughtfully, "I wonder what they are working on now. Do you know, Erica?" At Erica's headshake, "There's the Estes suit, something to do with real estate, and the Crowell will suit. It can't be either of them. They aren't important enough to warrant Wade's enthusiasm. Although he is prone to consider every case his biggest."

"Mr. Harlow looks as if he'd be a good trial lawyer," David said, to keep her talking about members of the family. "His appearance is right for pleading."

"The Judge says Wade is one of the best counsel he's ever heard. He himself does most of the will probate, drawing them up, and so on."

David said, "Dry business, wills. Must be boring."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Sally answered innocently. "Not if Wade knows what he's talking about. The Judge

drew up Herbert Seldon's will and now that he's dead they seem pretty excited about it. The other night they argued with Dad over it until all hours of the morning. He says there can't be any question of his right to the oil stock, but," appealing to Steve for confirmation, "you know how determined the Judge is to live up to the very letter of the law. Wade is just as bad. Dad was so cross."

"I've never seen him so angry," Steve volunteered. "He practically accused Wade of trying to do him out of the stock."

Seeing Andrea's look of interest, Sally explained, "It was Herbert's intention that Dad should be able to buy in at market value all the Youba Oil stock he owned when he died. At least that is Dad's contention and the Judge agrees with him. Wade says the will is ambiguously worded and doesn't mean that at all. Ann thinks the stock should go to little Jack."

"I suppose it all depends on the interpretation of the wording of a will," David said.

"Yes, it does. But I should think Herbert's will would be foolproof. The Judge drew it up." Sally added as an afterthought, "He's executor, too."

David made appropriate sounds of interest and glanced at Andrea. She interpreted the look to mean that she should create a diversion and change the subject. She smothered a yawn behind her hand and murmured, "Tiresome things, wills." She addressed Sally. "Is there anything I can do to help you this morning? Water the lawn?" with a laughing glance at the teeming rain.

"Wade wanted us to come and lunch with him at Antoinc's. But with the weather so bad I thought we'd be cosier at home." Sally shivered as the high wind blew a slashing downpour against the windows. "Steve will do the shopping, won't you, Steve? And Judy will be down soon, I imagine. I must be here to do the honours." She said it without bitterness.

"I'll run along, Sally, and get the list from Jason." Steve rose lazily to his feet. "When I return I'll go out to the theatre and work on the backdrop for the second act. It hasn't been

fixed, has it, Erica?" At her headshake, "Something ails one of the ropes and we might have trouble with it to-night at the dress rehearsal."

"Lunch, Steve?"

"No, thanks, Sally."

She caught at his sleeve as he passed. "Steve, Dad promised to send Norman and Warren back to help with the props. Do try and patch up your differences with Norman. It makes matters so hard for Erica—all this squabbling—and we do so want the show to be a success."

Steve bent lightly and dropped a kiss on the top of her curls. "All right, youngster. Your word shall be my law. Don't bother your pretty head about it any more." He went out of the room, whistling.

Sally sat silent, her eyes downcast, until the strains of "Johnny Doughboy Found a Rose in Ireland" were cut short by the slam of the heavy doors. ✓

CHAPTER V

THE balance of that day passed quickly. The rain stopped shortly after lunch and the sun shone brilliantly. Jason settled Andrea on the flagged terrace beneath the live oak at the corner of the theatre. In a comfortable chair, she sat reading and dreaming and listening to the gay voices of the members of the cast who were working on the props.

By five o'clock Andrea was trying to arouse herself sufficiently to go indoors to bathe and make herself ready for dinner when Judith Seldon came strolling leisurely down the path. Despite the gayness of her garb—blue slacks, red shirt, red espadrilles—she looked thin and tired, the fine bones of her face almost showing through the delicate covering. Yet Andrea thought

that even in her exhaustion Judith was more alive than any other person she had ever known. It was easy to understand why she was a stormy petrel.

“Feeling better?”

Judith peeled off the small blue and red cap she was wearing and tossed it on the pavement. Purple shadows gleamed among the blue-black curls and lay deep beneath her eyes. She ran her hand through her hair and stretched out languidly in the long chair. “I don’t know. Yes, I suppose so.”

Andrea wasn’t sure if it was tactful to ask about her experiences. She was trying to think of something to say that would be interesting and not upsetting when Judith broached the subject.

“I wish I could forget some of the things I’ve seen.”

“I suppose they were bad,” Andrea ventured.

Judith’s face whitened still more. “Ghastly. Men blown to bits; children driven mad by fear; women grovelling in the dust for food not fit for pigs. And the flies, the crawling things . . .” She shuddered. “How we did underestimate the Japs! They are so clever . . .”

“They won’t get very far without raw materials,” Andrea said blandly. She wanted to keep Judith talking.

“Oh, they’ll get those all right,” Judy said with a bitter little laugh. “Herbert said time and again that they’d make sure they had rubber and tin and oil. Well, they’re getting them.”

“Was your husband an oil man?”

“Sugar. Plantation in the Philippines. That’s gone now, of course.” She spoke indifferently, as if it didn’t really matter.

“We lived in Manila after our marriage. I loved it.” Suddenly she glanced at Andrea. “What made you think Herbert was in oil?”

“Sally said this morning at breakfast that your father was interested in Mr. Seldon’s oil stocks.”

“Oh, those!” Judith shielded her eyes from the afternoon sun. “That’s Youba stock that Herbert owned before he left

the States." She paused a minute. "How do you like Ann?"

"I didn't have a chance to talk with her at all. We only came last night."

Judith said unexpectedly, "She's a darling." Her voice was warm and friendly and Andrea was astonished to see that she meant what she said. Apparently the fact that she had taken her best friend's husband had not changed her regard for that friend. "Ann didn't understand Herbert any more than Wade understood me. She was glad to be rid of him, you know, although I doubt if she'd admit it. Ann cared for Herbert, in a way, but she's the type that is more mother than wife."

"I know," Andrea assured her. She felt, too, that she knew what had caused the exotically beautiful Judith to become dissatisfied with the too-correct Wade Harlow, brilliant attorney though he was.

Judith frowned thoughtfully at a mocking-bird performing on a swaying palm frond. "How do you like Steve?"

"Very much. And you?"

"I don't know. I never met him until last night. Herbert used to talk about him a lot. They belonged to the same clubs. I'm a bit puzzled, however, about . . ."

"Puzzled about what?" asked a lazy drawling voice.

Steve Carstair was standing at the edge of the terrace with Ann Seldon hanging to his arm. She looked like a charming peasant girl, with her fresh apple-cheeks and smooth fair hair.

Judith said casually, without answering his question, "Oh, hello!" She turned calmly to Ann. "You look charming."

"I wish you didn't look so tired," Ann said bluntly. On impulse she leaned over and touched Judith's curls. "You even have a few grey hairs."

"Only a few?" Judith's lips twisted into a wry smile.

Steve laughed and pulled up a chair for Ann. He sat down on the foot-rest of Judith's, and absently pulled a stalk of grass through his fingers. "Well, girls, we're all ready for the grand tryout. Aren't we, Erica?"

Erica and Sally, accompanied by Norman Mandel and Warren Sand, had crossed the terrace and joined the party. Erica ignored the question. "Steve, did you see my wand? It's disappeared."

"Not to-day. It's probably buried under some of the props. I'll go and look for it." He stood up and started towards the theatre, but Erica called him back.

"It's almost dinner-time. We're eating early because of the rehearsal. You might look for it later, though, if you have the time." To Andrea and Judith she explained, "It isn't exactly a wand, although I use it as one. It's a swordstick, only the blade has been fixed so it doesn't slide into the handle any more."

"It looks dangerous, Erica," Warren remonstrated in his pleasant voice. "I wish you wouldn't use it." The group had started for the house and he glanced back over his shoulder at Steve, walking with Judith behind him. "Don't you agree, Carstair?"

"Absolutely," Steve said firmly. "I spoke to Erica about it the other day, but she won't listen to me."

"I won't use anything else," Erica said flatly. "That stick brought me luck, and I'm not going to do anything that might change it."

"Superstitious?" Sally asked teasingly. Whatever had been the cause of the unpleasant scene between them the night before, it had been nothing personal, Andrea decided.

"And proud of it," Erica said stoutly, although the colour stained her cheeks. "The swordstick was given to me the night *The Black Crook* opened in New York. The wand I intended to use became lost, somehow, and this one was substituted. I do hope nothing has happened to it." She added candidly, "*The Black Crook* part of Stalacta was my first real success. I've kept the swordstick ever since as a mascot. It's silly to be afraid of it's hurting anyone. The blade is so dull it wouldn't cut butter, let alone a person."

CHAPTER VI

DINNER went off smoothly. Excitement and tension ran no higher than might be expected. Cassius Hart arrived in time for *café noir* and Andrea was surprised to see how eagerly the guests welcomed him. Somehow she had thought the Major was only slightly acquainted with the Brooks, with the exception of Robert, but Sally's greeting was much warmer than either Steve or Lawrence Lannon liked.

Lawrence Lannon was older than the rest of the group—at least fifty, Andrea surmised. He had cold grey eyes, thick dark brows, and a firm handshake. A person to depend on, she decided, and mentally wrote off the lawsuit scandal as just one of those things. He seemed old for Sally, more Judith's type. Yet as the meal progressed she thought she must have imagined his reactions last night, for he paid no attention to Judith, other than the usual courtesies, and devoted himself to Sally.

David and Andrea dawdled over their coffee and cigarettes. The others had left for the theatre early, to attend to final details before the rehearsal. *The Black Crook* was a long show, six hours for the complete run-through of the original script, but Erica had cut many of the scenes so that the total time for the performance was only three and a half hours.

"What's the play about?" David asked his wife. "Good plot?"

"Hardly any. Just enough to tie the show together. Poor boy falls in love with beautiful girl whose scheming mamma has promised her hand in marriage to a rich old Count. Villain number two is the Black Crook, a hunchbacked dwarf sorcerer, who craves everlasting life. Satan promises it to him in return for souls—one soul for every year. The first victim chosen by the Black Crook is the poor boy. He offers to help him win the girl and so intends to get him into his clutches. But the poor boy does a great favour for the Queen of the Fairies, who

helps him escape from the Black Crook. Boy wins girl and goodness triumphs over evil."

David laughed. "Steve calls *The Black Crook* the first leg show."

Andrea nodded. "Erica showed me press notices of the first performances of the original cast, back in the middle eighties. The critics did have a lot to say about the chorus's legs. Isn't it a shame some of those critics couldn't be reincarnated and go to see shows like the Follies?"

"Wonder will they let us smoke?" David asked as they neared the playhouse an hour later. He took his pipe from his mouth, knocked out the ashes on the palm of his hand, and dropped it in his pocket. He slipped his arm about his wife's slim waist as they entered the dimly lighted lobby. "Nice," he acknowledged appreciatively, noting the shining tiled floor, the plain wicket where tickets were to be sold, and the red-rope aisle leading to the box where on opening night the ticket collector would stand. He held open the heavy swinging door leading to the lobby proper. "Just like a real theatre."

"Don't, David, they'll hear you," Andrea said. "Mr. Brook's feelings might be hurt if he knew you weren't taking his plaything seriously. He loves the theatre."

They crossed the red carpeted floor, their heels sinking deep in the thick nap, and opened the door into the theatre, dimly lighted over rows of empty seats. The stage was brightly illuminated and most of the cast were grouped about the right wing where Erica, already in her queenly robes as Stalacta, was directing the placing of one of the props for the Harz Mountains, where the play opened.

Andrea stumbled against the pillar and the noise, slight as it was, attracted the attention of a woman seated in the last row of the right-hand aisle. She half rose and touched Andrea's arm, moving in to make room for them.

"What are you doing here?" Andrea asked in a low voice,

recognizing Judith. "I thought you were going to bed right after dinner."

Judith laughed shortly. "So did everybody else. I sneaked out the back door while you were having your coffee. Jason remonstrated but to no avail."

In the empty small house their voices carried to the stage. Erica peered over the footlights. "Is that you, David? Why don't you sit down front?"

"Andrea can't bear to see the grease paint. It spoils her illusions."

Erica laughed and Robert Brook, handsome and more pompous than usual in his trappings in the character of the Count, called to Andrea, "Ever seen a dress rehearsal before?"

"No." Then she voiced a question that had been puzzling her, "Didn't you invite guests to witness the rehearsal? I thought that was the usual method—trying it on them as it were."

Robert chuckled. "Bright girl. That's the way it's usually done. Bet you can't guess why we didn't ask any one to see this rehearsal."

Andrea thought for a second. "So, there would be more money for the U.S.O.?"

"Right. If I had asked the neighbours, as I intended at first to do, we'd have had a slim audience to-morrow night and not enough proceeds to make our time and efforts worth while. This way, they'll all come and pay for the privilege."

Apparently no one had noticed Judith sitting silently in the last row and Andrea felt it was not her place to call the girl to their attention. As the curtain fell preparatory to the opening, and the house lights went out, Andrea felt for David's hand and slid her cold fingers into his warm grasp.

"What's the matter, darling?"

"It's so black," she whispered. "Just like being smothered in a thick velvet curtain."

"Look at the exit lights," David advised. "That'll help."

"Dad built a real theatre, didn't he?" Judith asked proudly. David twisted uneasily in the seat. It was cushioned thick-piled plush and was comfortable, but he too felt uneasy although he hated to admit it. The empty rows of seats dimly seen in the red light from the exits, stretching away into the black depth of the orchestra pit, depressed him. Even the tuning-up process of the musicians seemed more weird than usual. Then the curtain rose slowly on the first act of *The Black Crook*.

Andrea leaned forward in her seat, wondering how Erica with the limited space at her disposal—would succeed in duplicating here the magnificent scenic effects of the metropolitan production. Robert Brook had spared no expense, evident for the play opened with little change from the original, and she settled back to enjoy herself.

"Who is the woman playing Dame Barbara?" Andi whispered to Judith a few minutes later. Steve was playing the part of Rodolphe, the poor artist who had told his sweetheart, Amina—played by Sally—that he was unable to sell his picture. He had left the best one in pawn for bread. She sympathized with him, but their plight, she said, was very serious as the Count Wolfenstein, great lord of the valley, had asked for his hand. Her foster mother, Dame Barbara, already had given her consent. Robert Brook, as the Count, would undoubtedly do a fair job, but even to Andrea's inexperienced eyes, Dame Barbara was turning in a magnificent performance, and she was anxious to meet her later.

"Dame Barbara is Mrs. Atwood Taylor, the Judge's wife," Judith whispered. "Didn't you meet her?"

"The Judge was ill last night, so they didn't come to dinner. And they came straight to the theatre to-night."

"Hot stuff, isn't she?" David muttered.

Andrea smothered a laugh, remembering a line from the original play that exactly described Dame Barbara. "Was there ever such a fright? Why, she looks like a great horned owl dressed up in the cast-off finery of a peacock. Obscene!"

me tickle the old buzzard." She hoped Erica hadn't cut that line—it was the best in the show.

Judith said critically, "Why didn't Dad have programmes printed? With all these different parts, it's hard to remember who is who."

"They'll be ready to-morrow," Andrea told her. "It isn't easy to get things printed in a hurry any more, with the man-power shortage."

Judith agreed and they settled back to watch the third scene. "Wade is splendid," she said enthusiastically when Hertzog, the Black Crook, abused his servant, Greppo, the Drudge. "Norman as the Drudge takes his part well, but I never would have believed that Wade could be persuaded to make himself into that hideously deformed creature." There was reluctant admiration in her voice. "Even his complexion is leaden-looking, and how he can twist himself into that hump-backed, knotty-limbed shape, lame and with a horribly crooked body, and hold it for the duration of the play, is beyond me. He should have been an actor."

"There is a lot of the dramatic in all good trial lawyers," David observed, applauding vigorously as Hertzog played magnificently the incantation scene in the Serpents Glen. He invoked his familiar, the demon Skuldawelp, and at the appearance of the awesome figure—complete with death's head and filmy drapery—David rolled in his seat convulsed with silent laughter.

"Cassius!" he gasped when he could speak. "Cassius, as I live and breathe. My sainted aunt. Who would have thought it of the Major?"

"Do stop," Andrea implored him, but he continued to laugh and Judith and she joined him when Cassius, unable to grant Hertzog's wish for power, tripped over his robe as he retreated in awe before the forces of Darkness. Satan, or Zaniel, in the person of Lawrence Lannon, appeared in a tremendous clap of thunder surrounded by numerous dancing animals that sprang from nowhere to greet him.

The Black Crook begged Satan to grant him everlasting life. He was promised as many years as he should deliver souls, the accounting to be made at the end of a year. The bargain was signed with a pen of fire. Satan asked that Rodolphe be given to him as his first victim, and the curtain fell on a scene of lightning, thunder, and fierce rain during which storm Satan disappeared and Norman as Greppo went mad from fright.

The play ran quickly from scene to scene. The watchers leaned forward in their seats. The plot was really no plot at all ; it was hackneyed and melodramatic and worn, but it had something alive that carried it along. Erica had done a superlative job of producing.

Andrea voiced this thought aloud. "Mr. Brook said she was a wonderful producer. She's certainly proved it. She's taken this old melodrama, cut it down, turned it into something suitable for moderns, and still kept its old-fashioned flavour."

Judith said, "She's a honey." There was no rancour in her voice, no resentment of the woman her father expected to marry. She accepted Erica as matter-of-factly as Sally had done. Her eyes were on the stage where Erica as Stalacta was explaining how a mortal had freed her from Satan's clutches. He had transformed her into a dove, but Rodolphe had released her from the spell by killing a snake that was about to swallow her. In gratitude she warns Rodolphe of the dangerous character of the Black Crook and gives him a ring which will always bring her to his aid if he is in trouble.

The next act followed quickly. Warren Sand as Dragonfin, one of Stalacta's guards, was doing a fine job of pantomime, and Dame Barbara had a comic scene with von Puffengruntz, her suitor.

"If the Judge could know how funny he looks when he's making love to his own wife," Judy giggled, "he'd die of embarrassment. Especially when he invents all manner of excuses to avoid her and get some time for himself. I think it mean of Erica not to let him have a break for once. He's such a pet."

"He's good," Andrea said. "They make a splendid team." But she was beginning to be bored and wondered if Erica wouldn't have done better to cut the play still more. She closed her eyes to rest them and must have dozed for a few minutes, for she opened them, startled at a loud cry from the stage. She knew at once that something was wrong, even before she saw that both Judith and David were standing in the aisle. David started running towards the stage and she followed. Behind her she heard the patter of Judith's quick steps.

The Black Crook lay on the floor, blood staining the white shirt he wore beneath his cloak. Erica knelt beside him, trying to loosen his flowing tie, but her hands shook so that Cassius Hart pushed her aside and himself undid the knot.

Wade tried to get to his feet, protesting that he wasn't hurt, that it was the force of the blow Erica struck that knocked him over. "I wasn't expecting quite such a heavy one and overbalanced." His eyes met Judith's and he shoved the Major's hands away and quickly pulled his shirt together over the wound. "Anyway, it's only a scratch."

"What happened?" David asked curiously. "I thought the wand Erica had was only a make-believe swordstick."

"It's a real swordstick," Erica explained, "only it doesn't work."

David looked at the widening stain on Wade's breast. "It works rather too well, I'd say. Better take him to the dressing-room, Major, and bandage it. Or call a doctor."

"It's nothing to fuss about," Wade insisted, starting for his dressing-room. "A little iodine, a steri-pad, and some adhesive tape and I'll be as good as new."

Cassius Hart, his hand under Wade's arm as he guided him to the exit, said to David, "You might look at that blade, Ramsay. Erica had prodded Wade with that stick ever since they first started rehearsals, and it never was sharp enough to do any damage before."

Andrea explained to David, who was running his thumb over the blade. "Erica said it wouldn't cut butter, it was so dull."

David said grimly, "It isn't dull now. It's as sharp as a razor blade. It cut through two thicknesses of cloth to give Wade that nasty wound."

Erica said faintly, "Who could have done such a thing?"

Robert Brook said angrily, "If I ever find out . . ." He controlled himself with an effort. "We should finish the rehearsal, if Wade is able. Cassius can look into this matter later."

Wade and the Major returned shortly, and the former insisted he was quite all right. Only the stiff way in which he held his arm reminded one of the wound. The bloodstained shirt was covered by his cloak. As he looked at Judith his glance was like a caress. "So you were worried about me, Judy?"

"Only about the play," Judith answered carelessly. "I want it to be a success for Erica and Dad." She walked indolently across the stage and took up her position in the left wing. "I think I'll see the rest of the show from here."

"Why don't you join her?" Erica asked the Ramsays, calling the cast together with an impatient gesture. Neither she nor any of the rest had exhibited any interest in why Judith was at the rehearsal and not in bed as she was supposed to be. Even her father had only frowned warningly at her when she answered Wade so rudely. Her sudden impulses apparently were well known, even to such a newcomer as Erica.

The zest had gone from *The Black Crook*, however, although the cast struggled desperately to get back into their earlier mood. David knew they would be as relieved as he when it was over, and as soon as Count Wolfenstein was finally killed by Rodolphe and Amina had flung herself into her lover's arms, David started impatiently for the exit.

Andrea caught his sleeve. "You can't leave, darling. That would be too rude," she whispered. "You haven't seen goodness triumph yet. The powers of darkness in the person of Wade Harlow must be vanquished. Don't you want to see what happens to the Black Crook?"

“I’d rather smoke,” David muttered.

Erica threw the whisperers a disapproving glance, and the prompter’s whistle called up Pandemonium. Satan was seen seated on a throne of illuminated skulls, with the Recording Demon again armed with pen and inkhorn of fire. Under cover of the music and the song of the long-tailed devils, Judith asked softly, “Who’s the demon?”

“Slim Boone, your father’s secretary.”

“He came since I left home,” Judith sighed faintly. “A lot has happened since then.” She lapsed into silence as the trial of the Black Crook by Satan began. Lawrence, as Satan, ordered the sorcerer to keep his promise to deliver to him at least one soul, or else he must pay the penalty. As Rodolphe had escaped from the Black Crook, he was dragged to the edge of a flaming pit filled with horrid forms and tossed in. That was the end of the sorcerer.

The curtain descended and the cast crowded on the stage, taking their places as rehearsed for the curtain calls they were certain to receive on opening night.

Suddenly Janice Lannon, who had played a minor part, called in a frightened voice, “Where’s Wade?” She shoved her companions frantically aside and ran towards the dressing-rooms. By the time they recovered from their astonishment her terror-stricken cry told them she had found him.

Wade Harlow lay on his back on the floor of his dressing-room, his eyes staring at the bright light in the ceiling. Janice, dazed and white, cowered in a corner watching the Major, who had been the first to reach the scene, examine Wade. The cast jammed the narrow corridor and stood on tip-toe to see over Robert Brook’s shoulders as he stood in the doorway.

Sally said quickly, “Shall I call a doctor, Cassius? Or an ambulance?”

The Major rose to his feet and brushed the robe he wore as automatically as he would have brushed the knees of his trousers. He said gently, “Call a doctor, Sally. Not that it will do Wade any good. He’s beyond help, I’m afraid.”

Robert Brook said firmly, "Sit down, Sally. I'll ring in Dr. Raul. He has a surgery just down the street."

Cassius pulled out the stool in front of the dressing-table for Sally. "Ask him to hurry, Robert. And don't touch anything any of you. We must leave everything just as we found it."

Erica said in a choked voice, "Can't we put Wade on the couch, Cassius? It seems so cruel to leave him lying on the cold tiles."

The Major shook his head. "I'm sorry, Erica. But we can do anything until after the doctor has made his examination. If he isn't certain of the cause of death, then we must notify the police. As a matter of fact, we probably must do that in any case."

"Why?" Judith asked.

As the Major didn't reply, Erica protested, "Surely Wade couldn't have died from that scratch I gave him with the sword-blade?"

"Probably not. But all cases of sudden death, unless caused by some evident disease, or an accident, always arouse suspicion of . . ." The Major hesitated a second, then added, "murder."

CHAPTER VII

ROBERT BROOK, hearing Cassius's remark, drew a deep breath, then exhaled it slowly. He looked like a man carrying an unbearable burden, as he turned away from the telephone. "Dr. Raul will be here shortly."

Erica crossed the room, skirting the still body, and stood beside Robert, seeking comfort from his nearness. Suddenly she spoke to the Major. "If the doctor doesn't know what killed Wade, and does insist on calling in the police, do I have to tell them about the sword-blade?"

The Major said reasonably, "We could hardly hide that from them, could we, when we must account for the wound on Wade's chest? And it is always safest to tell the truth, anyway." As if I would advise them differently, he thought. They all knew his profession, and it had never made any difference in their friendship for him, although not all persons cared to associate with policemen—no matter what their rank—on equal terms. He hoped the doctor would discover that Wade had a bad heart—it would be so much easier for all concerned. If not, and murder were added to the problem of the stolen oil . . . he turned abruptly to Judith. "Was Wade in good physical condition so far as you know, Judy? Had he ever had any serious illnesses, like heart trouble?"

There was an oddly indefinable expression on the girl's face. "He had rheumatic fever when he was little. Would that . . .?"

Cassius Hart's tired mind revolved about this angle. If it is only a natural death, he was thinking! But the instinct that had helped his rapid rise from rookie to first-class detective on the Homicide Squad of the New Orleans Police force, and which had assisted his rapid advancement when he became a member of the Military Intelligence, told him this was too easy a solution. He distrusted easy solutions of problems, whether they concerned stolen oil and traitors to their country or murders. He said wearily to Judith, "Thanks, honey. But we mustn't count too heavily on it." His glance rested for an instant on Sally's face and then moved on to Steve Carstair, standing protectingly behind her as she sat hunched over on the stool at the dressing-table, her chin resting in her cupped hands.

Lawrence Lannon, who had been holding Judith's hand closely clasped in his, said angrily, "Why do you persist in making a mountain out of a molehill, Hart? Just because you once were a policeman doesn't give you any licence to scare women to death with loose talk." He released his hand from Judith's and, taking a handkerchief from his pocket, stooped and

laid it gently over Wade's face. "Even to hint at murder is sheer nonsense. Who would do such a thing?"

"That's a funny question, coming from you," Norman Mandel said sneeringly.

Lawrence's cold grey eyes narrowed and his jaw set stubbornly. He took a step towards the boy. "What do you mean by that?"

Norman cried shrilly, "Everybody knew you hated him because of the lawsuit."

Before Lawrence had a chance to answer, Janice stepped between them and faced Judith, who had slipped her hand through the crook of Lawrence's arm and was attempting to pull him back from Norman. Since her discovery of Wade's body she had stood, dazed but tearless, listening to the discussion. Now, when Norman accused her brother, by implication at least, of hating the man she loved, she raised her hand and wearily brushed the fair hair from her forehead. The gay peasant frock of blue and gold she wore served to accentuate her frailness; she looked tired to exhaustion but her voice was clear and razor sharp: "Then you *did* kill him!"

"I?" The astonishment on Judith's face, if feigned, was a masterpiece of acting, Andrea decided. "Why should I kill him? We parted the best of friends."

Robert Brook broke in heavily, "Did you have a talk with Wade, Judy?"

"Yes. Just before dinner. He came to my room and we sat and chatted for a bit." For the first time a hint of emotion tinged her voice. "It was like old times."

Janice had drawn back and was glaring at Judith, the back of her hand covering her mouth. Whatever she intended to do or say was forestalled by Robert, who asked hoarsely, "What did he want, Judy? What could you two have to talk about?"

"He wanted me to marry him again," Judith answered simply.

Janice sprang at Judith, her hands extended like claws. Then her arms fell and she threw herself on the floor beside Wade's

body, her fair head buried on his breast. "Wade! Wade! It's Jan, darling. Say it isn't so!" She burst into a torrent of weeping.

"You bitch!" Warren Sand's voice was charged with loathing as he looked at Judith. He stooped and lifted Janice into his arms. Over her pale head he spoke bitterly to Robert, who was standing beside Erica, his face impassive. "You'll fire me for that. Well, I don't care. I've wanted to tell your daughter what I thought of her for a long time. Everything was okay until she came back home. Why didn't she stay away? She's never done anything but make trouble." He bent his bright head over the pale one resting on his shoulder. "Don't cry, honey."

"He's such a nice boy," Andrea thought in dismay. "But he must be younger even than I'd thought, to break loose that way. I do hope Mr. Brook will overlook his insult to Judith. He's kind, so perhaps . . ."

Erica rushed quickly into the breach. "Take Jan into my dressing-room, Warren," she ordered briskly, opening the door to the adjoining room. "She can rest on the couch until the doctor comes. I'll ask him to give her a sedative." She closed the door after them and came back to Robert's side, slipping her hand through the crook of his arm confidingly. "He didn't mean it, dear," she said. "It was just that he's so upset. He's cared about Jan so long, you told me."

Robert Brook patted her hand absently, but said nothing. Judith said quietly, "Don't worry, Erica. Dad wouldn't punish him for anything he said about me. He's heard worse things than that said about me, haven't you, darling?"

Her father said sternly, "Hush, Judy! This is no time for airing personal quarrels. I have no intention of discharging Warren. But he must learn that it's not always wise to say what one thinks. He'll be mighty sorry for what he said when he cools off. He's a good lad at heart."

Sally said suddenly, "I thought that was Steve's dressing-room, Erica," indicating the adjoining room now occupied by

Jan and Warren. " Didn't you have the big one at the end of the corridor ? "

Steve answered for Erica. " I changed with her, Sally. She wanted to be closer to the stage, in case she was needed for anything during the times she was off. It didn't matter about me being so far away. I didn't have to do any directing."

Erica said wearily, " I think I moved the position of the rocks for the mountain set at least five times." As a car door slammed, " That must be the doctor."

The Major hurried out to meet him and in a few seconds they heard the two men greet each other, then the sound of their quick steps crossing the stage. An ejaculation, and Cassius's " Watch the ropes," indicated that the physician had stumbled over the long ropes that dangled from pulleys anchored to the roof. Like other theatres, this one had the usual clutter of lath-framed canvas scenery, odds and ends of furniture, and hundreds of props.

" Wish they'd get this over," David muttered, fingering his pipe uneasily. The others seconded his wish fervently, and turned to the doctor with relief.

Dr. Raul was thin and wiry, with crisp grey hair that curled close to his finely modelled skull. He wore horn-rimmed glasses through which his keen pale eyes peered intently at the group in the dressing-room, then dropped to the still body at their feet. He nodded pleasantly to Robert Brook, whose neighbour he had been for years, and listened to his hurried explanation in silence as he knelt beside Wade's body and lifted the handkerchief Lawrence had laid over his face. He felt for a pulse in the limp wrist, looked carefully at the pupils of his eyes, and, taking his stethoscope from his black bag, fitted the ear-tubes into his ears and applied the bell to Wade's chest. He listened for a minute, hesitated as he pushed the cloak and shirt aside and came to the crude bandage Cassius had helped Wade apply to the wound. He pulled loose the adhesive that held the gauze, examined the scratch carefully, then replaced it and went on with his work. After a few minutes he removed the ear-

tubes, replaced the stethoscope in his bag, buttoned the shirt and folded the cloak as he had found them, then rose to his feet.

“What caused the scratch?”

Cassius explained. “It wasn’t serious enough to kill him, Doctor.” It was a statement and not a question.

Dr. Raul agreed. “Nothing like it. Superficial only. Strange about the sword-blade, though.” He looked at Robert Brook. “Called the police?”

“Not yet. I thought we’d wait until after you’d seen him.”

David asked bluntly, “Any chance of its being other than a natural death? I mean, it’s heart trouble, isn’t it?”

Dr. Raul smiled faintly. “Heart trouble as a diagnosis covers a multitude of sins. Frankly, I don’t know what caused his death. I’ll know better when we’ve finished with the autopsy.”

Erica caught her breath. “You mean you can’t give a certificate? That we have to submit to questioning and all kinds of inquisitions because Wade died of a heart attack?”

“My dear lady!” Dr. Raul blinked his eyes rapidly behind their thick lenses. “If I was sure that Mr. Harlow died from a heart attack I would gladly sign a death certificate. But I don’t know it. In fact, I’m not at all certain of it. I examined him only last week for a new life insurance policy he was taking out and found him in perfect condition—as perfect as any man of his age that I’ve examined in a long time. I see nothing to do but ask for a p.m.”

Robert Brook said wearily, “All right, Doc. Want me to put through the call?”

Cassius said quickly, “I’ll be glad to do it, Robert. I know the Captain well.” He asked the operator for Police Headquarters and spoke rapidly to the desk sergeant who answered. “Captain Henry will be right out. He’s square. He won’t make things harder than need be. Anyway,” his gaze lingering on Sally’s distressed face, “he’s a gentleman. Not like the hard-boiled dicks of Sally’s favourite mysteries.”

David insisted quietly, “I think we are taking too much for

granted. It may be a natural death after all. Dr. Raul's idea, I believe, is simply to find out what he did die of—not to prove that it's murder."

Dr. Raul nodded. "Exactly. I don't know why you use the word 'murder,' but since you have I want to assure you that nothing here leads me to any such suspicion. As for suicide, I ruled that out instantly. Men counting on marrying again don't generally commit suicide a week before the wedding."

All the cast turned with one thought and looked inquiringly at Judith. She shook her head mutely.

"Janice?" Andrea asked.

The doctor looked from one bewildered face to another. "Have I betrayed a secret? I thought surely you would know," to Robert, who frowned thoughtfully.

"It must have been Jan, of course. Judy didn't come home until last night. None of us expected her. We hadn't heard since the invasion of the Philippines."

Dr. Raul nodded. He had known Judith since she was born. He knew of her marriage to Wade Harlow and her divorce and remarriage to Herbert Seldon. "Well, Mr. Harlow certainly was counting on getting married and that shortly. He took out a large policy for his future wife, or so he said. His partner," turning to Judge Taylor, "might know about it."

The Judge, an elderly very thin man, very distinguished even in his ridiculous Black Crook costume, cleared his throat sharply. "I knew about the policy. I heard him telephoning his insurance brokers. It was for twenty-five thousand dollars, I believe. I did not hear him mention the name of the beneficiary." It was the first time he had spoken since the discovery of Wade's body. He ran his veined trembling hand over his lean face and smoothed his small, closely clipped grey moustache. His long thin nose and slightly drooping eyelids gave him an arrogant, supercilious expression, Andrea thought.

Mrs. Taylor, sitting beside him on the couch, was short, sharp-witted, and pugnacious. She said quickly, "Why, Atwood! Surely Wade must have confided in you!"

The Judge answered mildly that his partner and himself were not in the habit of discussing their personal affairs. "And I never pry," he added dryly, "except in my official capacity."

But Mrs. Taylor was not to be snubbed. "Surely he told some of you," she accused, looking from one to another of the group. "Major," her eyes falling on Cassius who stood on Sally's other side, "didn't he tell you? I thought you were close friends."

"Not especially. I've known Wade for years, of course, but I hardly saw him after I went into the army."

Robert Brook said slowly, "Twenty-five thousand dollars. That's a fair-sized policy to carry in these times, in addition to Wade's other expenses. He made a lot of money, I know, but even so . . ." He raised his brows inquiringly at the Judge.

"He could carry it, all right," Judge Taylor said. "He did spend heavily, as you say, but he never exceeded his drawing account, to my knowledge. And there is a goodly profit already showing on the books this year."

Andrea said, "He expected to make a lot of money, too." She flushed as they all looked at her in surprise. But she stuck doggedly to her point. "Don't you remember? Last night at dinner when he was talking about having his brief-case put in the safe? He said he was on to something that was the biggest thing yet, or some such expression. He was awfully excited about it, anyway."

Slim Boone, sitting unobtrusively in a corner throughout the entire proceedings, said to his employer, "Mr. Brook!" When Robert turned to him, "Mr. Brook, Mr. Harlow was terribly excited about something he found out only yesterday. I've never seen him so keyed up. Usually he was sort of casual, if you know what I mean—he'd say 'hello' and go right on, but he stopped to talk with me." He swallowed nervously, his pale freckled face—smeared with the red, green and blue make-up essential to his part as Recording Demon—very earnest.

"What did he say, Slim?"

Slim twisted his bony hands together. "Just that I should

guard the brief-case with my life. Joking like, you know. He watched me shut it in the safe and said it contained enough dynamite to blow New Orleans off the map. Something like that, anyway."

Judge Taylor said unbelievingly, "You must be exaggerating, son. That doesn't sound a bit like Wade. He was excited when he rang up my house and asked me to meet him last night, but he didn't make any such claims as that. Otherwise I'd have gone, headache or no headache."

"That's what he said," Slim muttered doggedly. "I think he must have found some more papers after he talked with you, because he said distinctly that you'd get the shock of your life when you knew what you'd missed."

"What I'd missed? Then it wasn't a new case at all?" Scarlet spots stained the Judge's thin cheeks. He mentally began to review the files that had recently come to his attention.

"Never mind now," Robert Brook said. "It's easy to find out what the papers are—the brief-case is still in the safe, isn't it?" to Slim.

His secretary shook his head decidedly. "Why, no, sir. You sent for the brief-case yourself only a few hours ago. Don't you remember?"

Robert Brook's jaw dropped. "Why in the name of all that's holy would I send for Wade's brief-case? What's the matter with you, Slim? Lost your mind?"

Slim Boone said unhappily, "A messenger called for it just before dinner. I was working in the study and Jason brought him in. He had a letter signed by you—at least, I thought it was your signature—on Youba stationery asking me to give him the brief-case. Mr. Harlow was waiting for it at the office. I unlocked the safe and gave it to him. He signed a receipt for it and I put the letter in the file and didn't think any more about it."

Whatever anyone would have said was cut short by the wail of a siren that grew louder and louder and finally died away

in a long-drawn-out moan. "We'll have to look into this later," Robert Brook said, as the Major went to welcome the police and to explain the situation.

Dr. Raul eyed his neighbour thoughtfully. "I think you'd better tell Captain Henry about the brief-case, Brook. It might make a difference." As the oil magnate looked bewildered, "The difference between a natural death and murder."

CHAPTER VIII

THE medical examiner had come and gone. Wade Harlow's body had been sent to the morgue. Captain Henry, Cassius and David were in Robert Brook's study. If she opened her bedroom door, Andrea could hear the hum of their voices, although she could not distinguish what they said.

She slipped off the blue lace dinner dress she had worn to the rehearsal of *The Black Crook* and hung it carefully on a padded hanger. Deciding that a warm bath was the thing to quiet jangled nerves, she removed the rest of her clothes and wrapped a woolly white robe about her while she ran the water in the huge sunken tub. This was a good time to try out some of her scents, and she unpacked and opened a crystal bottle of *Original Sin* bath salts. The perfume from the pale yellow flakes was entrancing and she dropped the robe and stepped into the tub with delight, sinking down into the warm water with a delicious languor. As she contemplated her pink toes, showing through the soapy bubbles, her mind wandered to the events of the evening, even though she had decided not to think of Wade's death as anything except an unfortunate accident. "Not until we know for sure that it's murder," she thought. Then she realized for the first time that no matter how much

each of the group at the theatre had tried to believe it was an accident, a natural death, unconsciously all of them had at one time or another done or said something that proved murder had been uppermost in their minds.

"Captain Henry was nice," Andrea told her big toe, wriggling it back and forth. "He's about the same age as Cassius, I guess—fortyish." She recalled his tall spare figure—lanky, David called it—and sun-tanned intelligent face. His eyes and hair were brown, and although he was not as cultured as the Major, they had a lot beside age in common. "Both hunters," she concluded. "And dangerous," remembering again the line from *Julius Caesar* which she felt so aptly described such men. But Captain Henry had been most tactful, and not alone because Robert Brook and Palmetto Walk were so important.

Andrea thoughtfully wiped soap out of her eyes and tried to remember every detail of the scene. The Major had greeted him cordially and as an old friend, because they had been talking together as only friends do when they entered the dressing-room. He had introduced him to Robert Brook—Dr. Raul he already knew—and to the others as a group. The Captain's eyes had lingered on David and herself, separating them, setting them apart from the cast of *The Black Crook*, and Andrea felt certain that Cassius had explained—to some extent at least—their presence there. She imagined that Captain Henry knew or had been told that the Major was working on a case and that they were his unofficial assistants, even if he didn't know what the case was. Were Military Intelligence men allowed to discuss their work with the police? She'd have to ask David.

Captain Henry was smooth, though, she'd concede him that. Andrea squeezed water in and out of the bath sponge as she remembered how he'd quieted the alarm of the cast as they had questioned him about Wade's death, about the possibility of going home—as many of them lived at a considerable distance and it was very late—and the question of whether or not the

show was to open the following night with Wade's under-study playing the part of the Black Crook.

Captain Henry had replied thoughtfully, "If Mr. Brook feels like going on with the show, of course, as things stand at present I could raise no objections. Major Hart has explained the situation to me in detail and I have questioned all the members of the cast without discovering anything that would throw any light on Mr. Harlow's death. The wound given to him accidentally by Miss Lange is a disturbing factor, but on the surface not an important one." He had looked inquiringly at Robert. "If you feel you must put on the revival of *The Black Crook* because of the cost . . . ?"

But Robert had shaken his grey head decidedly. "I wouldn't think of it, although the USO certainly could make good use of the receipts. But I was fond of Wade, in spite of the fact that Judith and he were divorced, and I want to do the right thing by his memory." He cleared his throat. "My secretary will send a notice to the papers in the morning. Reserved seat tickets can be mailed in and Slim will send the refunds, or they can call at the Youba offices down-town for their money."

The Captain addressed the cast pleasantly. "Those of you who live at a distance, those of you who are not members of the family or staying at the house, may as well go home. As soon as the medical examiner comes and releases the body, it will be removed for autopsy. Until that report comes in you are all free to come and go, within limits. No one must leave town without permission. Please leave your names and addresses with the guard at the door as you go out."

"You mean we may go now?" Ann Seldon asked. She had been so quiet that few of them had remembered she was present.

Judge Taylor said gallantly, "Of course, child. This isn't a jail. The Madam and I will take you home, if you will allow us."

Sally spoke up impulsively. "Why not stay with me, Ann? I'd like so much to have you."

Ann said gratefully, "That's kind of you, Sally. But I dislike leaving the twins alone. They are just old enough to need a great deal of attention."

Andrea captured the soap, which had fallen from the dish and was bobbing about in the water, and applied it to the sponge, then lathered herself thoroughly. She adjusted the rubber cap she wore to keep her hair dry and stepped under the shower. Drying herself with the huge fluffy towels, she felt pleasantly clean and refreshed. She wished David would hurry. Perhaps the men had decided that Wade's death was an accident, after all. Wrapped again in the warm robe, she went into the bedroom and stopped short in surprise. Ann was sitting in a big chair by the window, waiting for her.

"I didn't mean to startle you," she said. "I knocked and knocked, but nobody answered. Then I heard the water running in the bath, so I opened the door and came in. I knew your husband wasn't here. I saw him in the study with Captain Henry and Mr. Brook as I crossed the loggia."

Andrea began to see her night's sleep evaporating before her eyes. Ann evidently had come with the intention of staying a while. "I thought you went home," she said.

"So I did. But when I reached there I found that mother had come unexpectedly to visit me, so I left the twins with her. Sally seemed to need me—she's never been very close to Judy—so I changed and came straight over."

"I didn't hear your car," Andrea said, thinking hard. Somehow Ann's explanation didn't ring quite true, although she looked her usual competent self in a black linen suit with a small black hat settled firmly on her fair hair.

"I came on the street car," Ann explained. "Sally's in the kitchen. She's making sandwiches and cocoa, and wants you to come down. I told the other girls on my way to your room."

"All right. I'll change to slacks and a sweater." Andrea began hurriedly to dress. She pocketed cigarettes and matches and held the door open for Ann to pass through.

On the way to the kitchen Ann suddenly blurted, "I've been dying to ask you a question ever since I first met you. You needn't answer unless you want to, but I wish you would. Are you and your husband detectives?"

Andrea stopped short in amazement. "Heavens, no!" she gasped. "Whatever gave you that idea? David is an architect now working for the government on housing problems, and I do medical research and a bit of writing now and then. We are just as ordinary as we seem." Or almost, she added mentally. After all, the Major had emphasized the fact that they were unofficial and on their own.

Ann seemed disappointed. "I thought perhaps Robert had called in detectives on the will—Herbert's, I mean. You two didn't seem like his usual business acquaintances." She shivered and pulled her suit coat closer about her. "It's cold here in March, isn't it?" She opened the kitchen door and called, "Here is Mrs. Ramsay, Sally. Why, where is she?" as the kitchen was empty, although bread and butter and tins of spread were standing on the table.

"Gone to get something, I suppose," Andrea said, glancing at the clock ticking away on the shelf. "Almost half-past one o'clock. I didn't realize it was so late. The water runs so slowly in the bath it took longer than I thought." She sat down on the bench by the fire and warmed her hands at the blaze.

"You're in the old room," Ann said with a smile. "The tank has to be pumped up from the cistern every day, Sally says, and sometimes the boys forget. Then you get only a trickle."

"We had the same sort of arrangement at home for years," Andrea responded. An idea had just occurred to her, and she was busily investigating its possibilities. If she was right, it might be the answer to the way the oil was got out of the tanks at the field. She must talk to the Major about it. He'd know how those pipes ran. She wouldn't say anything to David until she was sure she was right. Suddenly she realized that

Anne had been talking all this while and she looked at her inquiringly. "I don't understand," she said, knowing she had heard nothing of the conversation.

"I said Robert wants to buy up Herbert's oil stock, and I don't want him to," Ann explained.

Andrea felt bewildered. Surely if Robert Brook bought in the stock he would pay a good price for it, the price at which Youba was listed, and that would give Ann the money. What was she grousing about? She explained how she felt as diplomatically as possible. "Wouldn't you rather have the money than the stock?"

"No, indeed!" Ann said emphatically. "The stock will be worth a great deal more money a few months from now, with oil becoming so important because of the war. Also," she hesitated, blushing suddenly to Andrea's surprise, "I want it for another purpose."

The blush was becoming. She wants to marry again, Andrea decided, and is using the stock as bait. Then she was ashamed of herself when Ann confided, "I can't bear to have Jack grow up thinking ill of his father. If I could keep the stock and tell him his father left it to him, I think it would give him something to tie to, don't you?" Her glance, her moist eyes were appealing.

"Why wouldn't the money, well invested, give him the same impression?" Andrea asked practically.

"It wouldn't be the same thing at all," Ann argued earnestly. "The stock is something personal, don't you see? It was the thing Herbert cared most about. He was crazy about the oil business—he started as an oil scout, you know—but Judith made him give it up and buy a sugar plantation." For the first time Andrea felt resentment of Judith in Ann's voice. She remembered, too, her conversation with Judith that very afternoon, at which time Judith had denied, or practically denied, that her late husband had any interest in oil outside of owning some stock in her father's company. She must remember to tell this to David as soon as she had the opportunity. Ann added

simply, "I suppose you think I'm silly, to make such a point of wanting Jack to have the stock?"

"I'm sure if you tell Mr. Brook how you feel about it," Andrea said, "he'll fix it some way so you can keep it. He's really kind."

Ann shook her head. "I don't say he isn't kind. But he won't do a thing about the stock. I've already asked . . ." She broke off as Judith entered.

She had changed her long black dinner dress for a peacock blue taffeta housecoat buttoned from the top of the tight bodice to the bottom of the hem; leg-o'-mutton sleeves added to its old-fashioned appearance and increased her look of fragility.

"Bit late for a snack, but I couldn't sleep, so I slipped on this coat and came hunting company." Judith inhaled deeply from her cigarette and flipped the ash into the fireplace. "Meeting still going on, isn't it? Wonder what really ailed Wade?"

"That's what she really came for," Andrea thought. "She wanted to find out if we know anything she doesn't. Probably thought David had told me something." Aloud she said, "I don't suppose we'll know until after the autopsy report is in."

Ann turned to Judith. "I know I haven't the right to ask, Judy, but for old times' sake tell me, did Wade really ask you to marry him again?"

Judith laughed bitterly. "Still the sceptic, Ann? Did I ever lie to you? I'd have been better off if I had lied my way through life, as most of you do. Oh," as Ann uttered a shocked protest, "I know you don't call it lying. You tag it with some polite term like evasion or tact, but it's lying just the same. Believe it or not, Wade did ask me to marry him."

"I believe you," Andrea assured her. "I believed you when you said it the first time."

"Thanks!" Judith looked pleased.

"I do, too." Ann's face was scarlet. "You have a sharp tongue, Judy. I only meant that it didn't seem possible Wade would do such a thing when he was going to marry Janice.

And he must have been serious about it or he wouldn't have taken out a life insurance policy with her as beneficiary."

"Of course he intended to marry her," Judith said crossly. "For heaven's sake, Ann, don't be so literal. Don't you know that Wade got the greatest pleasure out of being the perfect gentleman and doing what his exaggerated sense of importance told him was the thing to do? Even if only subconsciously, he felt certain that I would refuse him and he could go ahead and marry Janice with a clear conscience."

"You make him sound so cold-blooded," Ann said faintly.

"Still the incurable romantic," Judy scoffed. "You never will understand people, Ann."

Andrea agreed with Judith, although she wasn't certain that she could have summed up the situation so clearly. She liked Judith, too, even if she didn't approve of her. It wasn't necessary to approve of people to like them. Some of the greatest scalawags had the most charm.

"How do you feel about Erica?" Ann said. "She's so lovely to look at that one almost forgets she's an actress. Oh, I don't mean that is anything against her, but somehow I wouldn't have thought your father—" She broke off as the door opened and Erica entered the room.

"I hope I'm not too late," as Andrea moved over to make room for her by the fire. "With all the excitement, I don't feel at all sleepy."

"Aren't you cold?" Andrea asked, glancing at Erica's lacy negligee. As the actress shook her head she continued, "Sally seems to have vanished."

Judith stifled a yawn. "I imagine she's making chocolate in the summer kitchen." To Andrea, "You haven't seen it, I think. It opens on to the bayou-garden—the herb section. You must see it."

"Wade's death haunts me," Erica blurted suddenly. "Robert feels it keenly. I do, too, but I can't help regretting the fact that we had to close the show. It would have meant a great deal to me to have had this revival a success."

Ann seemed faintly shocked but Judith said consolingly, "It won't have to be postponed for long, Erica. A month or so, I should say, for people to forget the unpleasantness connected with it."

Andrea said practically, "I wouldn't postpone it that long. I know it seems dreadful, but you'd have a larger crowd if you put it on in a few days—right after the funeral, you know. There is something about a death under unusual circumstances that appeals to the morbid streak in the public." How horrible that sounds, she was thinking, shocked that she herself could speak so callously of an accident or a murder so soon after it had happened. Yet she had told the truth.

"I know," Erica said, "but Robert has old-fashioned ideas about death."

"And other things," Judith added. Their eyes met and both women laughed. There was rapidly growing a strong bond of sympathy between them.

Andrea was about to comment on her liking for the old-fashioned virtues when the door was flung open without ceremony and Sally backed into the room. She placed the laden tray she was carrying on a table and closed the door. Her rich *Black Crook* costume had been changed for a knitted wool suit of soft grey, and a shell pink cap of the same wool was perched on her black curls.

"I made a pot of chocolate," she said breathlessly. "You'll have to wait a bit, though. I ran so fast." She sank down on a chair and held her hand against her heavily pounding heart.

"Why on earth did you run with that heavy tray?" Judith asked.

"Because I was in a hurry to get here," Sally said, taking a long breath. She got up and began to pour the chocolate into thin Limoges cups. "I intended to come through the bayou-garden; it was so much closer. But I almost ran into someone—a man, I think it was but I'm not certain—at the foot of the outside stairway. He made off across the garden without

saying a word. Silly of me to be so frightened. It was probably one of the boys who didn't want to go through the loggia because the police—at least Captain Henry—are still with Dad in the study."

Erica said frowningly, "But Andrea's is the only room opening onto the balcony, Sally. Certain you didn't see a shadow?"

"Of course not. I know a man when I see one. It could have been a woman, though," she added thoughtfully. "If she wore slacks . . ."

Judith said seriously, "Anyone can reach the balcony from either of the rooms next Andrea's. The other galleries run around three sides of the house, but that one only goes part way across the garden side. An agile person can step from the window of his room on to the railing easily. I've done it hundreds of times, and so has Sally."

Andrea didn't like the idea one bit and said so, in spite of Judith's derisive laughter. "Who has the rooms next to mine?"

"They're vacant," Sally answered. "Norman's is down the corridor next to Erica and Dad uses the one across the hall when he doesn't sleep downstairs. If he's working late he seldom comes up for fear of disturbing us."

So that explained why Robert Brook had been upstairs the previous morning when David had heard him talking with Erica. "It must be nice to have two bedrooms," Andrea said idly. "If you get tired of one you can move into the other."

They all laughed and Sally explained, "The suite really was mother's. Dad uses it occasionally, but he prefers the downstairs one next the study. I suppose now it will be fixed over for Erica." She looked inquiringly at the woman their father was soon to marry.

"I don't want it," Erica said flatly. "I'm more than fond of your father," speaking to the two girls, "but I don't expect to act like a stepmother in a melodrama. You're old enough

to handle your own lives and make your own mistakes. I like the big room I have now. Robert can keep the one he has downstairs. If none of you object, I'd like to make your mother's into another guest-room."

CHAPTER IX

DAVID, softly opening the door of the bedroom an hour later, found his wife lying peacefully asleep in the huge bed, her hand beneath her cheek, her red curls spread across the pillow. She was sleeping so heavily she didn't stir when he slid in beside her, after undressing in the bathroom so as not to make any noise. He was glad the accident to Wade hadn't upset her. He had been afraid it would bring to mind all the distressing episodes she had gone through the previous year.

Strange, he reflected, that Captain Henry didn't show more interest in Wade's death. He relaxed and stretched luxuriously, then linked his clasped hands underneath his head. From the pillow he could see through the open window to the dark trees that hemmed in the garden ; the wall was only a dim white shape against their blackness. The palmettos stood out in bold silhouette against the greying sky. The stars were fading one by one. Somewhere a rooster crowed and at the homely sound David chuckled softly to himself. "It needed just that," he told himself, "to make me see how ridiculous it was to think Wade was murdered." How he came to that conclusion he didn't know, and didn't stop to figure out. "All the same, it's mighty funny about that sword-blade. And funnier still because none of the family seems to take it seriously. If I were Cassius, the first thing I'd do would be to find who had an opportunity to steal it and sharpen it. The second thing would be to find out what became of Wade's brief-case." His sharp

mind worried that idea as a terrier worries a bone. "When I suggested going to the office to-night to look for it, you'd have thought I'd suggested blowing up the White House. It couldn't have created any more of a sensation. Even Captain Henry took issue with me." He brooded on it for a bit. Then the stillness, the peace of the night soothed his tired body, and finally he fell asleep. Once, towards morning, he roused slightly, thinking he heard steps outside the balcony door. But when he sat up to listen all was quiet, and soon he fell asleep again.

The next morning was Saturday and Sally had ordered trays sent to all the rooms, so that the Ramsays ate their breakfast and read the papers in comfort. Finally David laid down the paper and reached over to tweak his wife's hair.

"What in the world were you girls gabbing about last night?"

"Wade's death."

"Anybody mention anything about the brief-case?"

Andrea thought a few minutes. "I don't think so. Ann went home and changed, and came back to stay all night. Funny thing to do, wasn't it? Judy wanted to see if I knew anything that she didn't about last night. I like her, David. And Sally . . . Sally made chocolate and sandwiches for us. But she was dressed for outdoors—knitted suit and saddle oxfords—and I had the idea she'd been somewhere first. Nothing definite to go on." She related all the incidents of the evening, including the man Sally claimed to have seen in the garden. "Most likely a shadow," dismissing her own fears.

David listened carefully. "The brief-case worries me." He told Andrea how he'd wanted to look for it at the Youba Company, since that was the place the messenger had taken it, according to Slim, but that his suggestion had received no support. "You'd have thought I was crazy, the way they looked at me. Mr. Brook said that Monday would be time enough to investigate the contents of the brief-case. And the

Major acquiesced. At least, he did to the extent of saying nothing."

"Then he had a reason," Andrea said slowly. "He's clever." She added, "And he could be cruel. I can't make up my mind about him. Sometimes I like him a lot and again I don't like him at all. Just the same, he never let that brief-case affair go over until Monday, or even until this morning. I'll bet he had Captain Henry send men there to look for it before we came in from the theatre."

David said uneasily, "You don't trust him?"

"I trust him, but that doesn't mean that I have to like him." Andrea added irrelevantly, "He's crazy about Sally."

Diverted, David asked, "Are you sure? I thought Steve Carstair had the inside track there."

His wife smiled faintly. Just like a man, she reflected. "He does like Sally, but she still thinks she is in love with Lawrence. She'll marry the Major in the end, but she has no idea of that as yet. Lawrence is in love with Judith."

There came a sharp knock at the door. "It's Brook, Ramsay. Could you come down right away? I'll be in the study." As he went down the hall, Robert called over his shoulder, "The autopsy report just came from Captain Henry."

A few minutes later they were in the study, listening to the Captain. "The results of the post-mortem were negative," he said. "Unless the organs show traces of poison later, which seems to both our physician and to Dr. Raul, who witnessed the autopsy, most unlikely, Mr. Harlow died of a natural cause." He stopped and waited for comment, but none being forthcoming he continued, "That is, the death certificate will read 'heart failure.'"

Robert Brook said uncertainly, "You sound as if there was something wrong with that."

Captain Henry, who still wore his trench coat, stuck his hands deep into the pockets. "Not at all. He did technically die of heart failure. But why, neither Dr. Black, the medical examiner, nor Dr. Raul has the slightest idea. All of the

organs, including the brain, appear healthy. And none of their tests so far have shown any symptoms of poisoning."

David asked quietly, "Then we are to understand, Captain, that the autopsy showed nothing at all that wasn't normal? No mark, no sign of any kind?"

"Nothing, unless you count a tiny red spot on his shoulder, about as big as a pin-prick. It was put down merely as a matter of record when the medicos were going over him. It doesn't mean anything." He added thoughtfully, "I think."

"Then it's all right for me to make arrangements for the funeral?" Robert asked.

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Brook. Go right ahead. Sorry to have caused you such a lot of inconvenience," he added, "but you know how these cases of sudden death are. There are always so many chances for mistakes that we feel we must be extra careful. Especially in war times."

Cassius strolled to the door. "How about Ramsay and me going along with you, Captain? I'd sort of like to have a look at that red spot."

"Sure. Glad to have you."

As the men left the room, Andrea sat listening to the sound of their feet crossing the loggia. She wished they had asked her to go with them.

CHAPTER X

WADE was buried on Monday and the will was read on Tuesday. Neither David nor Andrea had attended the funeral, which was conducted quietly. But Robert Brook, with no explanation for his request, had made a point of their being present at the reading of the will. David confided to Andrea that he thought it was the Major's idea, seconded

perhaps by Captain Henry, because he felt certain that neither of these astute gentlemen was satisfied with the findings of the post-mortem.

"They have nothing to go on except that tiny red mark on Wade's shoulder," he said, wrinkling his forehead thoughtfully, "but instinct tells them there is something too pat about his death. I feel the same way. If the oil business isn't tied up in it I'm a bigger dumb-bell even than I thought." He had taken the afternoon off from the housing department and stood at the library window gazing out over the richly blossoming garden.

It was almost dusk. Over the garden wall lights glowed suddenly like tiny yellow oranges in the blackgreen foliage of the magnolias ; the house from which they shone was hidden by the trees. A brecze, stirring the leaves of the live oaks, blew across the terrace and rattled the awnings on the gaily striped chairs sitting empty and lonely looking in the swiftly gathering night. David had a sudden vision of Wade Harlow's laughing face, so handsome, so vivid, with the tiny black moustache clipped close above his full red mouth. He turned back to his wife, vowing to find out the truth if it were within his power. There was no excuse for murder.

Andrea was dressed in a thin grey handkerchief-linen costume that set off her vivid hair and deepened the blue of her eyes. She was smoking, the cigarette held negligently in her slim fingers. She was warm and vivid and desirable and wholly his. David crossed the room and sat down beside her on the scarlet and grey couch. Almost at once Judith and Sally came in and found places for themselves. Steve and Norman and Robert Brook followed close on their heels. But Erica and Ann were still absent when Jason ushered in Judge Taylor, carrying his brief-case, and looking more aristocratic than ever in his severe black business suit. Jason brought decanters and glasses on a silver tray, placed them on the big mahogany desk near the window, and withdrew, closing the heavy door behind him.

"Isn't Jan coming ?" Judith asked her father.

"Ann went after her. Lawrence refused to come, although I asked him. I think he had some words with Warren over his actions at rehearsal and Jan apparently took Warren's part, with resulting strained relations." Robert smiled wryly. "Always the stormy petrel, weren't you, darling." He didn't expect an answer to his statement and continued, "Where is Erica?"

"Waiting for Jan and Ann," Sally told him. She accepted the glass of sherry Steve poured for her, and sipped it thankfully. She looked tired and thin.

The Judge said, riffling his papers impatiently, "Do we need to discuss any other business than the will? If so, we can start with that. I have a dinner engagement," he added pointedly.

Judith said impudently, "Now, Godfather! Restraine yourself."

It was the first intimation Andrea had had that the Judge was Judith's godfather. She was amused to see the lines of irritation fade from his face as he glanced at her with a twinkle in his eyes.

"You'll never change, Judy." The Judge swung towards the door as Ann, Erica, and Jan entered in a group. "Let's get down to business quickly." It was a sad as well as a disagreeable duty for him to read the will of his young partner. He wanted to get it over with so that he could sit quietly in his club and relax and forget, if only for a few hours, the fact that the firm of Taylor and Harlow soon would be no more.

Erica, a black turban binding her pale golden head, crossed the room and sat beside her fiancé. Jan wore black too, but it did not become her.

Steve Carstair served them with drinks and they settled down to listen to the Judge. "I see no point in making a long preamble," he said quietly. "There are only one or two points that could possibly raise any questions. One of these, with Mrs. Seldon's permission," with a slight bow in Ann's direction, "I'd like to settle now." He took a long legal document from his case and opened it, laying it flat before him on the desk. "This is an unofficial decision of the Surrogate's.

regarding the wording of the will of the late Herbert Seldon. I say 'unofficial' because the will has not been contested, and both Wade and myself thought it best to submit it to Judge Harmon and ask his advice. I mention it at this time as it has a definite bearing on one of the clauses of Wade's will. In other words, if the Surrogate decided that my interpretation of the wording of Herbert's will was legal and therefore valid, and Wade's interpretation of the same wording was invalid, Wade wanted to do something to make up to Jackie for what he felt was an injustice to the child."

Robert Brook said before Ann could speak, "If I can buy in the Seldon stock, Wade has left its equivalent to the boy. Right?"

The Judge nodded. "Exaggerated sense of chivalry," he said dryly.

Robert said sincerely, "I want the boy to have some of his father's money. But I don't want any Youba stock held outside of the family. The stock I gave Judy as a wedding present and which she turned over to Wade to handle comes back to me, of course." He looked searchingly at the Judge's disturbed face. "I never asked Wade to endorse it over to me after the divorce because I still considered him a part of my family."

"The Surrogate decided in my favour," the Judge said, looking appealingly over his glasses. "I have no choice but to carry out Herbert's clearly expressed desires. I hope Mrs. Seldon will understand that. Mr. Brook will pay a fair price for the stock, I am sure. As for that Wade held . . ."

Ann interrupted. "I cannot believe that Herbert intended to cut his son off with a pittance."

"Oh, come, Ann! Don't be childish," Robert said impatiently. "A hundred and fifty thousand dollars isn't a pittance. It's a nice sum of money, no matter how you figure it. That is what I expect to pay for the stock. And don't forget that half of it belongs to Jill. You can't expect Jack to have everything."

Ann bit her lip but said nothing more.

The Judge removed another legal document from the brief-case and opened it. He cleared his throat and began to read Wade's will. Andrea, listening to the droning voice listing moderate sums to Jason and the other Brook servants, thought how futile after all it was to hustle and bustle to accumulate wealth. Then she thought of Wade's face when he was explaining about the papers in the brief-case he had put in his father-in-law's safe, and she realized that it wasn't the money so much as the joy in his work that had been his chief motivation.

Judge Taylor's tone became even more unctuous, if possible, as he finished the list of bequests to the servants and began on those to whom Wade had felt himself indebted—either through love or friendship. To his father-in-law, Robert Brook, he left all the Youba Oil Company stock ; to the Judge, his law books and \$10,000 ; to Sally, his mare Bette and \$10,000 "to buy trinkets to remember me by" ; to Judith, "my dearly beloved wife, whom no divorce can ever make less dear," the sum of \$50,000 and all his personal possessions, wherever they may be situate ; and "to my fiancée, Janice Lannon, all the rest, residue and remainder of my estate in grateful acknowledgment of her affection."

Ann, sitting rigidly in her chair, drew a long breath and looked with a puzzled frown at the Judge, who turned a page slowly and again began to read, following the lines with a shaky forefinger. "In the event that the Surrogate, Judge Harmon, should decide that my interpretation of the wording of the will of the late Herbert Seldon is null and void, I do desire that the Youba Oil stock, heretofore presented to my honoured father-in-law, Robert Brook, be turned over to John Seldon, son of the late Herbert Seldon, to be his forever. To recompense the said Robert Brook for his loss I desire that a sum equal to the worth of the stock shall be set aside for Robert Brook from the residue of my estate, the balance to become the property of Janice Lannon, as afore-mentioned."

Erica said "Oh!" in a small voice, and laid her hand appealingly on Robert's arm.

"I don't believe it," he said, his face flushing brick red.

"It is quite legal," the Judge said stiffly, shuffling the papers together and putting them back into the brief-case. "Wade added the codicil the same day he took out the insurance policy for Miss Lannon. That is in addition to your other inheritance, my dear young lady."

"I don't want it," Janice said, her face very pale. "I don't care anything about the money. I only wanted Wade, and now that he's gone, nothing matters." She smoothed the skirt over her knees with trembling fingers. A huge diamond on her third finger caught the light in a thousand flashing sparks.

She never wore that before, Andrea reflected. He must have given it to her and she was waiting for the public announcement. Janice was silly not to have said something. All this hush-hush business is bad.

"I don't want the money," Jan insisted stubbornly. "Give it to Judith. She's the one Wade really loved. He even has to put it in his will." Tears ran unheeded down her white cheeks.

Judith said sharply, "Don't be any more of a fool than you have to be, Jan. If you didn't know by this time you never would. He put that phrase in about me because it pleased his vanity to feel like a heartbroken lover. I suppose you'd call it vanity. He got a lot of satisfaction out of it. Actually, he never really cared a hoot for anyone but himself." She added in a softer tone, "He was sweet sometimes, though. I remember . . ." To Janice, "Wipe your eyes, get your money, and have a good time with it. And later on marry some nice boy. If you think I'm hard-boiled, heartless, okay. But that's the sensible way to look at it."

"Tell it to Lawrence," Janice sneered. "You'll make a good team."

Judith said nothing. Her father eyed her sharply, then rose as the Judge moved towards the door.

"Sorry, Judge. But to have so much of the Youba Oil Company stock out of my hands now is a great disappointment," Robert Brook apologized. He accompanied the older man into the loggia and the rest of the group looked at each other uncertainly. Finally Judith said to Ann:

"Congratulations. I know you wanted Jack to have some oil stock."

Ann looked pleased. "I did. But I really wanted it to be Herbert's stock. Still, if the wording of the will was so obscure that they had to get the Surrogate to interpret it . . ."

Judith said, "I don't see why Jackie ever has to know that it wasn't his father's stock, Ann. Dad won't tell. He'll be over this in a few days. He never holds a grudge about anything. He was angry with Wade because he thought Wade should have sided with him. Illogical, but there you are."

"I don't think that would be honest, do you?" Ann asked dubiously. "I think I'll have to tell Jack, but not until he's older."

Judith threw up her hands with a laugh and changed the subject. She leaned over and lightly touched the clip of white jade that glowed against the black of Erica's turban. "I've been admiring that ever since you came in. White jade! It must be priceless."

Erica bent her head so Judith could examine the ornament more closely. "I wish it were. I adore jade and when Norman gave me this I was pleased because it's the best imitation I've ever seen. He's often given me little presents—he's a sweet boy—but nothing so lovely as this."

Judith's frown was puzzled. "I would have sworn it was real". She leaned back, still interested in spite of finding out that the ornament was only imitation. "But of course if Norman gave it to you . . . He has so little money, poor boy."

"I think your father is quite worried about him," Erica said. "He thinks it isn't healthy—mentally, I mean—for Norman to go back to China. His father, a missionary, is such a strict

one. Robert says he allows Norman almost no freedom. And one has only to watch the child for a bit to see the state he's in. He has no control over his emotions at all."

Sally said to David, "Did they find Wade's brief-case, Mr. Ramsay? I know that Cassius and Captain Henry looked for it the night he died, but I forgot to ask Dad if they found it."

"I didn't know they even looked for it," David said, astounded. Colour surged into his brown face and anger darkened his eyes. A lot of help he'd be on this case if he wasn't trusted enough to be told that they intended going to look for the case that very night. Why had they put him off, when that was the thing he'd suggested? Perhaps the Captain already had sent a man down to the Youba office. They could have told him. There had been only the four of them to hear. Or so he thought. He was tempted to ask Sally how she received her information, but bit his lip and sat silent.

"Steve said the Captain sent a man to the office the minute he heard about it," Sally said innocently. "And they took away the sword-blade, too."

Erica started up in alarm. "They did! Without consulting me? I'll die if something happens to it." She bit her lip, looked frightened at the slip of her tongue. Like all theatrical people, she was very superstitious. "I didn't mean to say that. But I think Robert should have told me." She started hastily in search of him.

Janice rose to follow her. "I think I'll run along. I've not been feeling so well and I promised Lawrence I'd take it easy for a few days."

"Lawrence hasn't been writing much lately," Judith said.

"I know." Jan's face flushed as Judith spoke to her. She was ill at ease, embarrassed before the older woman's calm. "He hasn't done anything in a long while."

Judith said dispassionately, "I think I'll ride over with you and talk to him for a bit. I had a chance to say only a word or two the other night."

"All right," Jan said faintly. She looked to Sally for help,

but Sally smiled and helped Judith find a wrap. Obviously she was not going to Janice's aid. If she didn't want to take Judith home with her she would have to say so.

Judith grinned like a small boy enjoying a joke that nobody understood but himself. "I'll be back later," she said to the room in general. "Tell Dad." She was gone with a swirl of skirts, a black taffeta cloak thrown carelessly about her white shoulders.

CHAPTER XI

ANDREA ate her dinner in silence. She was upset over the entire matter—the stolen oil, Wade's death, her presence with David at the reading of the will, which should have been a strictly family matter, and the cross-currents that ran between the members of the Brooks' household.

David's brown face was troubled. From his seat beside Sally he glanced now and then at his wife. He knew how she felt. He felt the same way, he reflected, only more so. It seemed to him heartless the way the Brooks were treating the matter of Wade's death. And their apparent carelessness about the missing papers in the brief-case upset him still more. He'd wager a lot that the whole business would resolve itself once it was discovered what those papers were about. But his hands were tied.

"This case gets screwier and screwier," he told himself. "That oil business and Wade's death must be connected. How, I don't know." He answered yes and no to Sally in what he hoped were the right places and wondered how much longer Andrea and he would have to stay at Palmetto Walk. Having been assigned to this case, he couldn't just walk out on it. Yet it seemed silly to keep on when there was nothing con-

crete given to him to do. Suddenly he put into words his anger at the way in which he felt he had been cheated on the night of Wade's death.

"Was the brief-case found, sir?" he asked Robert suavely. His face expressed only polite interest but Andrea knew that underneath his assumed calm he was furiously angry.

Steve looked up from his salad, a piece of avocado suspended on his fork. "Brief-case? Oh," as he saw that David was addressing Robert, "I beg your pardon, Ramsay. I thought you were speaking to me."

Norman said in his disagreeable manner, that apparently only was used in connection with Steve, "You have a short memory."

"Tut! Tut! my son," Steve said in a patronizing tone that made Norman flush with rage. Before he could retort, Robert, who had apparently been taken by surprise by David's question, although he must have known he would have to answer it sometime, shook his head at the two men.

"Can't you find some interest in common, so you won't always be quarrelling?" he asked. "I should think you'd get tired of baiting each other." To David he said, "Would you mind telling me how you knew we were looking for the brief-case? Captain Henry asked me to keep it secret even from you. I," he said with an embarrassed smile, "did not approve of that, but there was nothing I could do about it."

Sally opened her mouth to explain that she had been the one who told David about it, but he broke in quickly to fore-stall her confession, "Why, I knew the brief-case had been sent to the office, so it was a logical conclusion that you'd hunt it up the first thing."

"Of course. Stupid of me." Robert's pleasant face was crestfallen. "Forget I said anything about the Captain not wanting you to know, will you?"

"Certainly," David agreed. He wondered how Cassius had felt at the order to keep him in the dark. "I hope you don't mind my asking?"

Erica said, "Of course he doesn't. What I want to know is, when do I get my sword-blade back? I don't see why it had to be taken out of the stick. It could have been tested for poison just as well in one piece."

"Don't you think we could find more cheerful subjects to talk about?" Robert murmured unhappily.

Andrea said sweetly to her host, "Judith is looking a great deal better, isn't she?"

Robert looked about the table. "Where is she?"

"She'll be here soon," Sally volunteered. "Janice may have kept her for dinner. Lawrence will probably bring her home." She flushed under Steve's penetrating gaze.

Jason coughed to attract his employer's attention. "'Scuse me, Mister Robert, but Miss Judy telephoned that she'll be home eleven, twelve. She and Mister Lawrence are goin' drivin', Suh."

Robert's face darkened.

David helped himself to cheese and was annoyed because he'd been switched away from the subject of the brief-case. Andrea saw the stubborn look about his mouth and thought, "Here we go." She'd had experience with that look before. Her husband said calmly, "Speaking of brief-cases," as if the subject hadn't been dropped fifteen minutes ago, "I suppose you did find Wade's at your office?"

Robert said that as far as he knew it hadn't turned up. Captain Henry was still looking for it.

David was not surprised. He had never thought the case would be found in Robert Brook's office, as the manner of its disappearance from Palmetto Walk was highly suspicious. "How about the letter the messenger brought? The one on Youba stationery you were supposed to have signed?"

"Gone, too," Robert said laconically.

"Out of the file?"

"Out of the file," Robert repeated. "Slim put it in. There's no question of that. He's absolutely reliable. I'll stake my reputation on that. I told the Captain and Cassius so."

"Just the same," Steve said flatly, "it puts Slim on the spot. He has my sympathy. He's such a harmless sort of guy."

"Don't let that meek pose fool you," Robert retorted.

"Slim isn't nearly so Caspar Milquetoastish as he appears. He's young and awkward, easily embarrassed, and greatly in awe of me, for some reason or other. But he's smart."

"Hope he's smart enough not to stick his neck out," Norman muttered. "There's something fishy about the whole thing, if you ask me."

"You think he wouldn't be safe?" Andrea asked. "What could happen to him?"

Norman, finding himself the centre of attention, was ill at ease, but stuck to his opinion. "I don't know what could happen to him. But you must admit it isn't usual for a messenger to appear from nowhere, produce a letter that causes Slim to hand over a valuable bunch of papers, and then to have messenger, brief-case and letter all vanish." He looked challengingly about.

"They'll find the messenger," David remarked confidently.

Norman looked inquiringly at him. "How?"

"Oh, the police have ways of tracing messengers and taxi drivers and so on. But I don't expect it will do much good. Such matters generally come to a dead end. The person who wanted the brief-case probably figured it all out ahead of time."

Sally rose from the table and motioned the other women to follow her. "Don't stay talking too long," she told her father, the dimples showing at the corners of her lips.

Andrea obediently followed her hostess, but she wondered if Erica was as annoyed at being dragged away from the discussion as she felt. As she crossed the loggia, she heard David's decided tones saying, ". . . can't tell what the police discover. It's a habit of theirs not to give out many of the things they find out. In that way they often worry the . . ." What else he said was blotted out by Jason closing the dining-room door.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when the party began to break.

up. Judith had not yet come home and her father had told Jason to leave the front doors unlocked.

"Once the bar is in place," he told David proudly, "it would take an army to break in. This door withstood all attempts to force it during the Yankee occupation of the city."

David got up from his place beside Andrea and examined the bar with interest. It was of ironwood, over eight feet long and more than four inches in circumference. It fitted into iron slots let into the framework of the door, and he could readily imagine how much strength would be required to force it.

"Do you use it regularly?"

"Every night," Robert explained. "It's the last thing you do before going to your quarters, isn't it, Jason?"

"Yes, Suh! I fasten this lock first and then slide home the bar." Jason turned the big brass key in the huge old-fashioned lock and pushed the bar through the slots.

"You forgot it the other night," Sally told the old butler teasingly. "When I came in from making a pot of chocolate for the girls, you'd not only forgotten to put up the bar but hadn't locked the door at all."

Jason stood listening, open-mouthed. "I never did leave no door open. No, Suh! I remember distinctly 'cause I was waiting for Mister Robert to ring for me to let out the policeman. Mister Cassius, he was sleepin' in the big house, but not the Captain. And the door was barred when I let him out, later." He looked reproachfully at Sally.

"I didn't lock it, Jason," she answered, frowning in her effort to remember. "I'm sure I didn't. I shoved it to with my foot and leaned against it until it clicked, but I never turned the key."

Andrea thought of the man Sally had seen at the foot of the balcony stairs and was about to remind her of the episode when the telephone rang sharply. For no reason that she could account for, a silence fell on the group when Jason answered, "Yes, M'am. This is Mister Brook's residence. No, M'am. I don't think so. Hold the wire, M'am. I'll sec."

Jason walked quickly across the loggia to where Robert was

waiting for him. He spoke quickly and Andrea thought he appeared upset. "It's Miz Boone, Mister Robert. She says how soon Mister Slim comin' home? She ain't been well and she don't like stayin' alone so late at night."

Robert asked in surprise, "Is Slim still here?" He looked at the study door which was closed, with no crack of light showing beneath it. "I didn't know he was working late. Where is he? Library?"

Jason shook his grizzled head. "No, Suh! Ain't no Mister Slim nor nobody else in the lib'ry. Maybe you better talk to Miz Boone, Mister Robert. I don't know where that boy could be. He never stay out like this before, she say."

Robert crossed the loggia with a determined step and spoke for a few seconds into the telephone. "I'll call you just as soon as I find out," he promised pleasantly. "Undoubtedly he stepped downtown for a few minutes and forgot to leave word where he was going. We've been rather mixed up here lately, with Mr. Harlow's death." He talked a bit longer and hung up. "No use frightening her," he told the group as he returned.

Erica said uneasily, "Maybe we'd better look in the study, dear. He might have fallen asleep."

Robert crossed the floor and opened the door. "Not Slim. I never saw him napping, that I remember." He snapped on the light and looked about, the others having followed to peer over his shoulder. "Not here." He closed the door again and started for the stairs, his arm about Erica's waist. "I'll see you to your room. Then I'll wait around a bit and see if he doesn't turn up. His mother promised to 'phone me if he came in before I called her back."

David said gravely, "Would you like me to wait up with you, Mr. Brook?"

"I'll be glad to keep you company, Uncle Robert," Steve offered. "I'm not a bit sleepy. I was going to read for a bit, as a matter of fact."

Norman said, stuttering a bit in his eagerness, "I knew it!"

"Knew what?" Robert Brook asked tartly.

"I knew something awful would happen to Slim." He twisted his hands together nervously. "He stuck his neck out just as I was afraid he would. You'd better call Captain Henry and have him look for him."

"Do you think that's necessary?" Robert asked David.

"If you don't hear from him within the half-hour, I would," David counselled. "He's been gone how long?" to Jason, who stood at the foot of the stairs listening anxiously to the conversation with the licence of an old retainer.

"'Bout six o'clock, I reckon it, Suh."

David said thoughtfully, "Five hours." As he saw Robert's grave face, "I wouldn't worry too much just yet. After all, we're probably borrowing trouble." He added lightly, "Slim's gone to the movies, most likely, with his best girl."

CHAPTER XII

"DO you really think anything has happened to Slim?" Andrea asked anxiously. David had decided that Mr. Brook did not really want his company and so had started to prepare for bed. "I didn't know him well, but he seemed nice. He has his mother to take care of, too. He's supported her ever since he was sixteen, Sally says."

"It certainly isn't like him to go off without telling anyone where he was going," David answered thoughtfully. "I wouldn't think it was serious if it weren't for Wade's brief-case and the disappearance of the letter from Brook's files in the study. The police should have located that messenger by now, but if they have they are keeping it mighty dark. Whoever stole the letter must be a member of the family. How else could they gain access to the study? Or if they did get in, how would they know where to look for it?"

"Slim made no secret of the place where he had filed the letter," Andrea reminded him. "He spoke of it in the dressing-room the night Wade died."

David nodded. "One of the cast of *The Black Crook* may be responsible, of course. They were the only outsiders there that I remember, except the police and Dr. Raul. But why? What interest would any of them have in the contents of Wade's brief-case?" He dangled the shoe he'd just taken off in his hand.

"None, unless the papers incriminated them in some way." Andrea removed the tiny gold-ball rings from her ears. "I'll be glad when you've finished all your work here so we can go home and settle down." She dropped the ear-rings in her jewel-case.

"I know," David said miserably. "This is a hell of a honeymoon." He brooded in silence for a few seconds. "I wouldn't feel so badly if we were accomplishing anything by staying here. But we haven't found out a thing. About the oil, I mean." He dropped the shoe he'd been holding and removed the mate to it. "Anyway, we'll get a good night's sleep, I imagine. Brook won't bother us even if Slim doesn't turn up. He'll notify Captain Henry or Cassius. And that reminds me, dear," taking off his trousers and folding them carefully before hanging them in the closet, "that I expect to have a heart-to-heart talk with His Highness to-morrow, whether he likes it or not." He padded over to the highboy and hunted out a clean pair of pyjamas. "He's been avoiding me for the last few days. With malice aforethought."

"Why?" Andrea asked in honest surprise. "Cassius is responsible for our being here."

"He isn't telling all he knows, and doesn't want to be questioned about it," David surmised shrewdly. "No man who has climbed as rapidly in his profession as has the Major could possibly know as little about the case he's working on as he pretends."

"He thinks an awful lot of Sally," Andrea said again, squint-

ing at her reflection in the mirror. " Maybe if what he found out implicated some one of her family or some one she cared about . . . "

" No soap," David said promptly. " Cassius is a funny kind of guy. Close-mouthed and hard to know, but square. He's got one of those consciences that would let him hang his own mother if she deserved it, although he'd probably shoot himself the next minute."

Andrea shrugged doubtfully. " I still wonder if I like him." She pulled on a nightdress and slipped her feet into quilted mules. " Who gets the bathroom first ? "

" Go ahead, honey. I'm going out on the balcony to smoke." David put on a heavy dressing-gown and opened the gallery door. The night wind lifted the light brown hair from his forehead, and he sniffed it eagerly after the closeness of the room. Pulling a chair to the railing, he sat down and put up his slippers feet on the balustrade. The balcony was peopled with a swarm of tiny nocturnal moths that came from the green wall of foliage surrounding the house. The moon rose while he sat smoking peacefully and crept inch by inch above the shadowed tree line. Fan-shaped palmettos and the mighty outlines of the magnolias broke into patterns of light and dark patches. In the corner of the garden he could see clearly the light walls of the little theatre, where Wade Harlow had met his death only a few days before.

" Now why do I always think of it as ' meeting his death ' instead of ' dying ' ? " David asked himself. " Is there something I know that I don't know I know, and that my subconscious tries to call to my attention ? "

Andrea, wrapped in a heavy shawl over her robe, came to the door and called to him, " It's so dark I can't see you."

" That's because your eyes aren't accustomed to it yet." He reached out his hand and pulled her down upon his lap. She curled up in his arms, her head against his shoulder, and they sat there in silence, content to be together.

Andrea broke the silence. " There's someone coming out of the theatre." She spoke low, half under her breath, but in the

stillness of the night even a whisper carried far. The dark figure that she had seen stepped back into the building and was lost to sight among the shadows.

"I don't see anyone," David said unbelievingly. "Your eyes are playing you tricks, dear."

"I did see someone," Andrea insisted. "He went back into the theatre as soon as I spoke. Sally saw someone in the garden, also. I think we should tell Mr. Brook and have him send the servants to look. Or go ourselves," she added reluctantly.

David guessed at once what she was thinking, that she was remembering another occasion when they had trailed a man to his death. "We'll tell Brook if you think best," he said, "but we are not going. I have made up my mind that no matter what happens we are through being amateur sleuths." Yet his instinct was to run down the steps and across the garden to the theatre. "It might be something important, something connected with your job," his mind reasoned. Yet he stubbornly held to his resolve.

Andrea already had left the balcony and he heard her open the door and call from the head of the stairs to Robert, who apparently was still sitting in the loggia awaiting news of Slim.

Robert Brook ran up the steps, panting a little as he came out on the gallery. "Not so young as I used to be." He peered intently into the dark. "Eyes aren't so good, either. Sure it wasn't a shadow?" to Andrea, who had followed him.

"Positive."

Without a word their host crossed the balcony and began to descend the stairs that led to the garden. "I'll have to go with him," David said in a whisper. "He isn't going to call anyone, evidently, and I don't want him to go alone. Why didn't Steve come, too?"

"He wasn't there," she whispered. "Mr. Brook was reading a paper. I didn't see any sign of Steve."

David hurriedly followed Mr. Brook down the steps and across the garden. Once he barked his shin on a branch that had fallen from one of the big trees and swore under his breath.

He caught up with Robert at the door of the theatre. It was locked and apparently untampered with.

"I haven't the keys with me," Robert Brook said, annoyed at finding the door fastened. "I forgot Captain Henry had it locked up until after the autopsy. Think we should go back for them? Or you wait here and I'll get them."

"I'll get them if you'll tell me where they are," David offered, thinking it was easier for him to run up and down the balcony stairs than for his plump host.

But Robert said testily, "Dammit, I don't know where I put them. Blasted nonsense, I suppose, but with so' many queer things happening lately I'm afraid to leave anything at all to chance." He started rapidly for the house. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

David heard him explaining a few minutes later about the locked door and Andrea's clear voice replying, as she accompanied him indoors, that she agreed with his opinion of the police. He smiled to himself, then jumped and was immediately angry at the startled ejaculation that escaped him when a soft voice at his shoulder said :

"Is it safe to come out?"

The door at his back had opened a mere crack and Judith's face was only a dull white blur against the blackness. He knew there was someone with her, for he could hear the heavier breathing of her companion.

"What are you doing there?" David demanded, keeping his voice as low as her own. "How did you get in, after the police locked it up? And who is that with you?"

Judy giggled at his tone, and the man with her chuckled also. "It's Lannon. And we got in with the key, of course."

"Dad's so careless," Judith said, still laughing. "We were sitting here on the terrace, talking, when you came out on the balcony. We could see you clearly when your wife opened the door, but we knew it was you anyway because of your pipe. None of the other men here smoke pipes, only cigarettes."

David didn't like being spied upon and said so. He was still

angry that his nerves had betrayed him into showing his nervousness when Judith spoke to him. Further, her indifference to her former husband's death had got under his skin. "Heartless," he'd told Andrea. He said aloud, "If you were merely sitting here talking, why did you go inside the theatre? And why didn't you come out when your father was here? Sending him to the house on a fool's errand to look for keys you already had!"

Lawrence said angrily, in a loud voice, "I don't like your tone, Ramsay. Apologize to Mrs. Seldon at once."

Judith said quickly, stepping between the two men, "Don't be a fool, Larry. Mr. Ramsay is right, of course. It was a stupid thing to do," she admitted to David, standing shivering on the damp stones of the terrace. "But you'd understand it better if you had known Dad longer. He's so old-fashioned, the poor darling, that he still thinks I should go into mourning for Wade, even though I no longer was married to him."

"You don't need to apologize for anything you do, Judy," Lawrence said, his voice still ugly.

"Hush!" She laid a slim hand on his arm. "Nothing we can say or I can say will make our actions understandable unless Mr. Ramsay wants to understand them. I stole the keys because we wanted a chance to talk in private, without anyone overhearing or looking askance at us because we were enjoying ourselves." She pulled the taffeta wrap she wore closer about her throat. "Even Sally thinks I'm a fallen woman," she added without bitterness.

"Nonsense," David said crisply. "Sally is jealous of you, that's all. She's young and has neither your poise nor your experience. You come home and attract all the attention, take her playmates from under her very nose, and they don't even know she's in the land of the living." He coughed warningly as he heard Robert Brook's pompous tones, obviously cautioning Andrea to watch her step. "Here comes your father!"

"We're counting on you," Judith whispered, drawing Lawrence silently with her into the blackness of the theatre.

The door closed soundlessly, and when David tried it carefully, he found it locked as before.

"You might as well come to the house, Ramsay," Robert called from the balcony. "I've mislaid the keys. I'd have sworn I put them in the top drawer of the desk, but I guess I was wrong." He added uneasily, "I should have put them there."

"No idea where he put them," David thought.

Aloud he said, "No doubt they'll turn up safely." He couldn't give Judy away, even if he didn't approve of her capers. She'd have been better off with a few good spankings, although that wasn't the way children were brought up nowadays. He climbed the stairs swiftly, glancing over his shoulder at the theatre, now once again silent and lonely in the dark garden, before entering the bedroom.

Andrea was alone, the door to the hall closed and locked for the night. She motioned him to fasten the door to the balcony and began to untie the cord of her robe. "I'd leave it open so we could see the moon, but I'm afraid." She didn't say of what and her husband let the remark pass.

"Did you find out where Steve is?"

"In bed, Mr. Brook said." Andrea kicked off her slippers and got into bed. She snuggled down among the pillows and pulled the down puff up to her chin. "That doesn't mean anything, though."

"Why not?" David asked curiously.

"He's sleeping on the couch in the library. He said he'd just nap there in case Mr. Brook needed him. About Slim, you know. He could easily enough slip out if he wanted to and nobody would be the wiser. So if that's who you think I saw, it could be." She yawned sleepily. "Do come to bed, dear, and put out the light. It will be morning before you know it."

CHAPTER XIII

ONCE in the night David was awakened by the ringing of the telephone. It rang and rang and he was about to get up and go downstairs to answer it when he heard the ring cut short by someone picking up the receiver. "Brook's on the job," he decided sleepily and turned over. The sun was shining on his face when he again awakened.

Andrea already was up and dressed and he hurriedly bathed and clothed himself in the freshly pressed suit Jason had hung in his closet. As he tied his tie, he inspected the tired lines about his eyes and mouth. "Another week like this last one and the government will need a new housing expert," he told his wife.

"You'll feel better after you've had your coffee," she told him. "Wonder if Slim reached home safely? We'd have heard otherwise, don't you think?"

But Slim hadn't reached home and hadn't been heard from, Mr. Brook said when they went down to breakfast. He looked tired and disturbed, also, and had sent for Captain Henry. Cassius was out of town again and couldn't be reached.

"We lost another three tanks of oil sometime in the last month," Robert said to David. "That is, what was left in the tanks wasn't worth mentioning. I wish I knew how they pull it off. The guards have been doubled but it doesn't seem to make any difference."

Erica and Sally entered the room, followed by Judith—fresh and glowing as if she had not been through the Japanese invasion of the Philippines and had not been out most of the night.

"What time did you get in, Judy?" Robert asked, after greeting his fiancée and his daughters affectionately. He looked up from his egg as she didn't answer immediately.

"Oh, sometime in the early hours," she answered lightly, having been assured by a slight motion of David's head that he had kept her secret.

"Early hours of what?" Robert asked, but he reached up his

hand to touch her caressingly as she passed his chair and sat down beside Andrea.

"Slim seems to have vanished," David volunteered to change the subject. "He left the house last night at about six o'clock, or so Jason says, and hasn't been seen since. At least, he hasn't gone home and his mother is worried."

Judith's brows drew together frowningly. "That's strange. Has he ever done anything like that before, Dad?"

Robert said heavily, "No. He isn't that type. He's never taken a girl out to my knowledge, although he might keep a harem and I'd be the last one to hear about it, and he doesn't drink or play cards."

Steve said as he entered, "Good morning, everybody. Nice sunny day. No word of Slim's whereabouts?" At Robert's headshake, "Too bad. Well, that's a job for the police. We can't help by worrying about it. What do you say, girls, shall we picnic down on the beach? It's so warm the little bit of wind that's blowing wouldn't hurt."

"I need you in the office," Robert Brook reminded him. "Have a beach supper, why don't you? Then I can come along and Ramsay too. He's a busy man. He can't take time off from his job in the middle of the day."

His tone was so casual that Andrea wasn't certain if he intended his words for a rebuke to Steve or otherwise. Steve chose to believe the latter, as he only grinned his wide friendly smile and agreed to the request. "I'll drive you up in my car, then, Uncle Robert, and Jason can pack the grill and the baskets in your two-seater."

Robert smiled at him and again Andrea was reminded of the affection between the two men. She saw Judith glance frowningly from one to the other and wondered. Erica saw the look and apparently wondered, also.

"Where is the beach?" Andrea asked. "I love picnics, but I didn't suppose there would be any place along the bayou."

"Lake Pontchartrain. I wanted to make a day of it and show the Ramsays some of the beauties of Louisiana. Tchefuncte

State Park has a dandy beach, and I thought Mr. Ramsay would be interested in seeing the ruins of the old Fontainebleau Plantation Buildings. The sugarhouse and the brickyard are near the lake. The famous bell is in the Cabildo, isn't it, Sally?"

"Yes, Steve. We won't have time to go so far, though. But the bell is worth seeing." Turning to David, "We believe that it crashed to the ground the morning Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation."

"You'd never guess that they are all worried to death," Andrea thought, admiring the deft way in which one of the family picked up the conversational ball and kept it rolling the instant another member dropped it.

Jason ushered in Captain Henry, who came in smiling but evidently interested and curious as to why he had been sent for. He refused the breakfast Robert wished to order for him but accepted fruit and coffee.

"Think I've bothered you on something that may not concern you at all," Robert said apologetically. "But it seems a bit odd, and under the circumstances . . ."

"Quite right," the Captain assured him, peeling an apricot and biting into the golden fruit. "If it isn't in my department I can give you the correct steer and see that it gets attention. Not another corpse, I hope?" he added jokingly. "That was in bad taste," he said contritely a second later. "We get callous in our business and sometimes forget that others do not see so much of death and misery as we do." But his eyes were hard and calculating and Andrea decided that the slip had been made for a purpose.

If he had hoped to surprise emotion from any of the group he did not succeed. Erica said placidly that she sincerely hoped they wouldn't have any more corpses except stage ones and how soon could she have her sword-blade? "I wouldn't want anything to happen to it. It's my mascot."

"Haven't you received it yet?" the Captain asked in simulated surprise. At that moment at his request it was undergoing still further tests in the department of toxicology. "I'll

have Hunter look it up without delay." Hunter was the sergeant who always worked with him. He addressed himself to Robert. "What was it you wished to see me about?"

"My secretary, Slim Boone, has disappeared." He gave the details of his disappearance so far as he knew them. "I suppose it seems silly to you to worry about his being gone one night, but his mother is frantic. She's a widow and he is her only son. Frankly, I can't understand it."

"He's the one who gave away Mr. Harlow's brief-case, isn't he?" Captain Henry said as if to himself. "Ordinarily, I wouldn't think much about it. Married men, single men, women of all ages, often disappear on jaunts of their own with no explanation to their families and return in a few days of their own accord. But under the circumstances, I think we'd better have the boys of the department see if they can pick him up." He glanced at the group, all of whom had ceased eating and were listening intently. "None of you know anything about this, of course, or you would have spoken before."

As none of them answered, the Captain continued, "Where is the young man who lives here? He might have seen something of what's his name, Slim, before he left."

"Norman? He isn't down yet. Ring for Jason, will you, darling?" Robert said to Sally. When the butler answered the bell, "Ask Mr. Norman to come down quickly, please."

After Jason had left the room, Judith asked the Captain, "Are you still of the opinion that my former husband's death was not a natural one?"

Captain Henry's pleasant face went blank. "Pardon?" Judith smiled at him over her coffee cup. "Don't be naïve, Captain."

"I'm not satisfied, if that's what you mean, Mrs. Seldon." He pleated the bright linen cloth anxiously between his brown fingers. "But until we have more to go on, all we can do is to call it a natural death and give permission for the burial. Not a trace of poison, not a single thing beside that tiny pin-prick of red on Mr. Harlow's shoulder can we point to as evidence."

Yet in my opinion, he did not die from heart failure without some outside cause being the contributing factor. He . . . ”

Norman entered the room and stopped, startled, at the sight of Captain Henry. His eyes travelled swiftly from one face to the other. “ Is something wrong ? ” he asked nervously.

Without answering him Captain Henry asked, “ Did you happen to see your uncle’s secretary last night when he left ? ”

“ He isn’t my uncle. I only call him that by courtesy, ” Norman answered. “ And if you mean Slim, he left the same time I did. ” He added bluntly, “ Why ? ”

“ What time was that ? ”

“ Half-past five, quarter to six. It wasn’t really dark yet. ” Norman scowled at the Captain.

“ Where did he go ? ”

“ I’m not going to answer any more questions until I know what this is all about, ” Norman answered belligerently. “ Did he have an accident or something ? ”

“ That’s what we are trying to find out, ” the Captain answered calmly. “ Where did he go ? ”

Norman was plainly puzzled and upset. He answered that he had left Slim at the entrance to the drive. They had walked down it together instead of following the flagged path to the gate. “ I thought he was going home. He called out after he’d left me that he was going to have *calas tout chaud* for dinner and that I should come along. Slim knew how homesick I sometimes am for real hot rice cakes. His mother made them wonderfully. ”

Robert Brook said in a distressed voice, “ Why didn’t you tell me you missed such things, lad ? I’d have had Jason try to make whatever you wanted. He couldn’t do more than imitate Chinese dishes, of course, but an imitation would have been better than nothing. ”

“ You’re awfully good to take such an interest, Uncle Robert, ” Norman said gratefully. “ But it’s only once in a while I get to missing Chinese food. It’s hard to get used to eating American

dishes at first, but," he added loyally, "next to Chinese I like Creole best."

The Captain broke in abruptly, "And did you go?"

"No. I went down to the corner for a pack of cigarettes, came right back, went to my room, and read the paper until time to dress for dinner." Norman plainly resented the question.

"Sorry to keep you from your breakfast." The Captain folded his napkin, and rose to his feet, indicating that the interview was over. "I'll have Slim's description flashed to all cars at once, and instruct the men to call in if they get any word whatever."

Steve said curiously, "I thought you were Homicide, Captain. Doesn't Slim's disappearance, if such it really is, come under the head of Missing Persons?"

Captain Henry nodded. "Right," he said agreeably. "But we don't work in water-tight compartments, you know. We occasionally do refer cases to each other and exchange evidence and views." He said good-bye and left, his footsteps echoing hollowly on the loggia tiles.

Sally said blankly, "You didn't describe Slim to him, Dad. He never saw him but once. I shouldn't think he'd remember."

"They know at Headquarters how many freckles you have," David told her lazily. But his mind was working busily. Captain Henry had taken Slim's absence much too casually. He decided that the officer was seriously disturbed. He would be like that.

Slim was still missing when the party, late that afternoon, was ready to leave for the beach. Robert had called Police Headquarters and learned that no one had reported seeing Slim since he left Norman Mandel to go home to supper. His mother had furnished Captain Henry with a list of all the friends who might know something of his whereabouts, but none of them had seen or heard of him. The afternoon papers carried a picture with a complete description and the request to notify Police Headquarters if anyone had any information regarding him.

Robert helped Jason stow a huge basket of provisions in the back of the car and then fastened down the lid. He hesitated at the door and said to Steve, waiting at the wheel, "I wonder if I'd have a chance for a few hours' fishing? You could drop me off at one of the fresh-water bayous and pick me up on the way back." He said apologetically to Erica, "You wouldn't mind, would you, dear? This business of Slim's has me so worried I'd like to get away alone for a bit."

"Not diplomatic," David thought, realizing how the oil man had aged in the past week, even though he refused to give in to his worries.

Erica understood and smiled at Robert's anxious face. "Why not?" she asked practically. "I hope you catch a large fish. I'll ask Jason to have it fried for my breakfast."

Jason's wrinkled face beamed. He liked very much the blonde woman his master had told him he expected to marry. There was nothing he wouldn't do to please her. He went back into the house and brought out Robert's heavy coat and a pair of wading boots. "So you don't ketch cold, Mister Robert."

Robert, who had been stirring over the rods and fishing lines in his study and had brought a handful of reels to the car, said to Jason, "Seen anything of my new rod? I was certain I left it standing in the corner of the study. But I don't see it there now."

Jason thought a bit and decided it had been there yesterday. He hadn't seen it this morning. The new parlour-maid had dusted the room and he had only given it a quick glance to make certain she had done her work thoroughly.

Robert was about to go back to the house for another look when Judith said impatiently, "I think it's in the theatre, Dad."

"In the theatre? What would my fishing rod be doing there?"

Judith shrugged and finished painting her mouth before answering. "How should I know? It was there last night because I knocked it down. I remember distinctly."

Her father said, "So that's where the keys went. Why don't

you ever put anything back where you find it ? ” To Jason, “ Hurry up and bring the rod here. It ’ll be dark before we get started.”

“ Yes, Suh, Mister Robert,” the old man answered soothingly. “ Has you got the keys ? ”

“ Where did you put the keys, Judy ? ”

“ In the top drawer of your desk in the study.”

“ They weren ’t there last night—this morning rather. I looked for them sometime after midnight and they were gone.”

Judith sighed wearily. “ I know, darling. I had them then. I didn ’t put them back until after breakfast.”

Jason had already gone to the house for the keys and in a few minutes they saw him moving swiftly down the loggia and through the garden to the theatre. He fumbled a second with the lock, then gave a grunt of satisfaction and swung open the heavy doors. He hesitated a second, then stepped inside. Almost instantly he reappeared, looking over his shoulder and calling as he ran. David saw at once that he did not have the fishing pole and somehow felt his apparent fright had driven all thoughts of his errand from his head. Robert went to meet him, annoyed at the delay.

“ Can ’t you find it ? ”

Jason paid no heed to the question. “ Mister Robert, please, Suh. Mr. Wade ’s done come home.”

Erica uttered a strangled cry, and Sally ’s face whitened. Robert Brook looked as if he ’d seen a ghost. Steve said curtly, “ What ’s the matter with you, man ? Frightening the ladies with such nonsense.”

Jason clasped his hands entreatingly. “ Please, Mister Steve. I heerd him moanin’.”

Andrea said “ David ! ” entreatingly, but David hadn ’t waited for the reactions of the rest of the group. He had started running across the garden, with Steve at his heels and Robert Brook panting behind them. The others trailed along as best they might.

David halted a second inside the big door. It was dark and

his eyes had to become accustomed to the dimness. Even before he pushed open the door into the theatre proper he heard the long hollow groan that Jason, in his superstitious imagining, had believed heralded the return of Wade Harlow.

When the panting Robert reached them David and Steve were kneeling beside Slim's prone body. He lay in the dressing-room where Wade had died, in almost the exact spot. Blood had dried in a dark brown pool beside his head and stained the delicate handkerchief laid over his face. It moved faintly with each torturous breath that he drew.

"He's alive," Robert said hoarsely. "Is he badly hurt, Ramsay?" He made as if to lift the injured lad's head.

David restrained him with a gentle hand on his arm. "I wouldn't touch him, Mr. Brook. He looks seriously injured to me." To Steve, who had been busy at the telephone, "Any luck?"

"Just caught him. Dr. Raul will be here right away. He said not to touch Slim—just put a blanket over him to keep him warm."

Robert sent Norman for blankets and hot-water bottles. "Always heard they were good for shock," he said, pathetically eager to be of help. He pointed to the handkerchief David had laid on the dressing table. "Who's do you suppose that is?"

Erica said instantly, "It's mine, Robert. But I didn't put it there." She pressed her hands to her temples as if they pained her. "I wonder who could be so cruel? Someone must hate me very much. First my sword-blade! Now my handkerchief!" She turned and groped her way to the door, feeling her way as if she were blind.

CHAPTER XIV

BEFORE Erica reached the door, Robert Brook had followed her, and Andrea was touched at the tenderness with which he attempted to comfort her for the unfortunate occurrences which tied her in to the series of accidents that seemed to dog the revival of *The Black Crook*. "Don't be frightened, darling," she heard him say, "I'll take care of you."

By the time Dr. Raul arrived, Erica had recovered her composure and stood with the others, seemingly her usual collected self. It was she who suggested sending one of the servants for Slim's mother, so that she might be at the hospital when the ambulance arrived there.

"Does Slim have a chance, Dr. Raul," Robert asked, as the doctor finished his examination and rose to his feet.

"A slight one. If he'd been found earlier, the shock wouldn't have been so great. He has lost a great deal of blood, too. Nobody knows how it happened, of course." He put the statement to Robert.

Robert shook his head. He explained how he had been going fishing and had sent Jason to hunt for his rod, which his daughter Judith remembered seeing standing in a corner of the theatre. "If it hadn't been for that Slim certainly would have died. We might not have come here for days." Suddenly a thought struck him and his mouth dropped open with the impact of the idea, then closed firmly. David, watching him, would have bet a sizable sum that it had dawned upon Robert to wonder why Judy had been in the theatre and when. And if she had seen the rod there yesterday, why had she not discovered Slim? He must have been lying on the dressing-room floor for about twenty-two hours, if he had been struck down soon after he left Norman at fifty-thirty or so.

Judith had the same impression. She said to her father, "I was in the theatre with Larry—Lawrence Lannon—when you were trying the door last evening. We wanted a chance to talk without being disturbed. There was no sound at all then, or we

would surely have heard it. I don't think Slim could have been here then," doubtfully.

Dr. Raul said kindly, "That is honest of you, Judith. No one would have known you were here if you'd wanted to keep it a secret. Larry never would have told. I've known him for a long time ; he's a fine man. But I'm under the impression that Slim was here and so deeply unconscious that he made no sound. He has a bad concussion, and may be on the verge of coming to." He bent again and laid his fingers lightly on Slim's wrist. "I wish the ambulance would come. Ah ! There it is now," as the faint wail of a siren was heard.

Slim's unconscious body was lifted carefully and placed on the stretcher. Dr. Raul and the ambulance intern walked on either side of it. Before they left, Robert said quickly, "How soon can he be questioned, Doctor ?"

Dr. Raul shrugged. "I have no idea. Not for a long time if he recovers."

"See that he has everything possible done for him," Robert ordered dully. "Spare no expense. Consultations, X-rays, anything you think might help."

"Shouldn't we have notified the police before Slim was moved ?" Sally asked.

"Steve did that when he put in the call for the ambulance," David explained. "Captain Henry was out, but there is a man on guard outside the door now. He'll stay here until the Captain comes."

Captain Henry entered the theatre almost on the heels of David's remark. He had returned unexpectedly, been told the news by Sergeant Hunter, and the two men had hurried to the scene.

"I don't see what more we can do at present," he said glumly after hearing all the group could tell him about it and ordering a thorough search of the premises. "Until the boy recovers consciousness there is small hope of tracing his assailant. We'll put a man at his door in the hospital, of course, just in case . . . But the odds are against it."

Sally leaned forward so that she stood out distinctly from her companions. "Shouldn't you call us all together and ask for our alibis, Captain?"

The Captain's brows lifted. "Where did you get that idea?" he asked.

The girl's face flushed but she held her ground. "Well, in all the stories I've read, that is the way it was done."

Unexpectedly the Captain nodded. "I've already instructed Hunter to do that. But I hope you won't judge the entire Police Department by the types of men you read about in mystery stories." With a twinkle in his eyes, "Why don't you come down to headquarters some day and let me show you around?"

Steve said gruffly, "Sally isn't interested in police stations."

"I'll be glad to come, Captain," Sally said graciously.

Steve flung out of the theatre without another word.

Norman laughed shrilly. At the hysterical note in his voice the Captain looked at him searchingly, and Robert said sternly, "That will do, Norman."

"Sorry, Uncle Robert," Norman said sulkily. He looked pleadingly at Erica, but she avoided his glance.

"Why don't you come in for a drink?" Robert asked the Captain. "There's no point in our staying here, is there?" He looked at the dim, dusty walls distastefully. After Wade's death the dressing-room had been gone over thoroughly by the Captain's men, but it still contained the odds and ends of costumes, props, and the torn scripts used by the cast at rehearsal. The dried pool of blood on the floor added nothing to the attractiveness of the place. "You can ask the questions Sally thinks you should in the drawing-room just as well." He grinned suddenly, and Andrea noticed for the first time how his smile and Judith's were alike—both warm, both impish and full of charm.

Captain Henry glanced sidewise at Sally and said, turning his soft black hat in his hands, that he guessed he might as well. "Hunter's done all the looking he needs to do, I guess."

"Bring Hunter along," Robert ordered, taking Erica's arm and leading the way across the stage, still cluttered with the set for the last act of *The Black Crook*. "It must be pretty dusty work hunting criminals." David admired anew his ability to put aside fear and worry to make the policemen feel at home.

Hunter, as round and jolly and deliberate as his superior officer was lean and grave and quick, sat uneasily on a priceless antique chair and balanced his glass on his knee. Judith, her vivid face alight, sat beside him, chatting busily.

Andrea, watching the pair across from her, laughed to herself. "Judy is trying to pump him," she thought, "and getting exactly nowhere." Captain Henry, sitting beside her, said in her ear:

"Hunter is a fox. That isn't the way to catch him." His face brightened to a smile as she turned to him inquiringly. "He likes grapes, but not such obvious ones."

"How do you go about it to find a missing person, Sergeant?"

The Sergeant drank daintily from his Scotch-and-soda, wiped his mouth carefully with his cocktail napkin and took his time about answering. "It depends on what kind of a missing person," he ventured, glancing from the corner of his eye at the Captain.

"Oh!" Judy said, as if she hadn't realized there was more than one kind. "Well, for example, the messenger who took the brief-case?"

The officer peered at her owlishly over the tops of his spectacles. "I couldn't say, Ma'am."

"You mean you don't know?" Judy asked incredulously.

The Sergeant was saved the necessity of answering by Captain Henry. "That isn't our department, Mrs. Seldon. We're Homicide." He glanced with a touch of mischievousness at Sally. "Why don't you ask your sister?"

Judith acknowledged defeat with a shrug of her shoulders and turned her attention to Erica, beginning a low-voiced conversation. The Sergeant gratefully relaxed and finished his drink.

Norman, sitting brooding by the window, looked so miserable that Andrea rose and went to him. He stood up as she approached and brought a chair for her, then reseated himself and resumed his blank stare.

"What's the matter?" Andrea asked.

He shook his head mutely, and she thought he seemed on the verge of tears.

"Surely you can tell me about it. Is it something to do with Slim? Nobody can hold you responsible, you know."

"Everything I do is wrong," Norman muttered: "Steve can get away with anything and Uncle Robert never rebukes him. He doesn't care what he says to me, and in front of everybody, too."

"Meaning Erica," Andrea reflected, remembering the look he had given the actress a short while ago at the theatre and her evident disregard of his feelings. At least, Erica had not responded to him in any way. Aloud she said, "That is because Steve is older, don't you think?" As he didn't answer, "You shouldn't be so sensitive. We are in a war, and all the people around us are as keyed up and frightened as we ourselves. That makes them less thoughtful than they would be ordinarily."

"I'm not frightened," Norman said sharply. "I'm never frightened. Why, when the Japanese burned our village . . ." He clamped his mouth shut as if he had said more than he intended.

"It must have been terrible," Andrea agreed. "But I'd put it out of my mind if I were you. There is so much to be done here and for the time you are in the States you ought to enjoy yourself more." I sound positively maternal, she reflected.

David, greeting Ann Seldon who had just come in, escorted her to the sofa where the Captain sat.

"What is this I hear about Slim?" was her first question.

The men explained as best they could. "There is nothing to be done until he recovers consciousness," the Captain said. David added, "And nobody knows when that will be."

"How did it happen?"

“ Somebody struck him a hard blow with some sharp object. Nothing was found near the . . .” David caught himself. He had been about to say “near the body” and changed it to “near Slim.”

Ann asked, horrified, “Do you think they intended to kill him? Or just to knock him out? I can’t believe that all these things—these horrible accidents—are happening here at lovely Palmetto Walk.”

The Captain answered that they would like to know the attacker’s intent themselves, but until the person or persons were found there was no way of knowing. “Frankly, I think it is only one person and that he left Slim for dead.”

David knew it was not usual for policemen to be so outspoken and he surmised that Captain Henry was leading Ann on for some purpose of his own. “Nobody seems to have any idea why Slim would be in the theatre,” he volunteered. “Or if so, nothing has been said about it.”

Ann said offhandedly, “That’s easy. He was looking for something.”

“What?” the Captain asked quickly.

“Why, the brief-case, of course,” Ann said matter-of-factly, as if there couldn’t be any doubt of it.

David’s jaw dropped. Somehow it never had occurred to him that Slim might be looking for Wade’s papers in the theatre. What could have caused him to think they might be hidden there? The Captain looked as surprised as David.

“What makes you think so?” he asked Ann sharply.

“Nothing else is gone,” she said reasonably. “He had to go looking for something in the theatre. He wouldn’t have gone there otherwise.”

“He might have followed someone,” the Captain said thoughtfully, thinking aloud. “He might have learned something, you know, that made him follow someone. Or he could have gone there on his own to look for the case, as you suggest.”

David stood up hurriedly. “Let’s go and search the theatre ourselves? We should have done it before, I suppose.”

"Sit down. There's no hurry. I left a man on guard. Nobody can get in while he's there. I'm keeping a twenty-four-hour watch on the entire place," gesturing about the room, "until the boy either gets well enough to talk or doesn't get well at all." The Captain drained his glass and waved away the second one Robert brought him. "I think one is enough for a man who's on duty. Oh, well, if you insist. Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb." He drank and set the half-empty glass down on its coaster. "We did look the place over after Wade was taken away, but we didn't find anything. We didn't search anything but the dressing-room thoroughly, however, as his death was certified from natural causes before we finished more than a superficial examination of the rest of the building."

"I was not criticizing," David said, smiling at the Captain's tone. "It just seemed as if we might find out more about the whole thing if we could locate those papers of Mr. Harlow's." I wonder does he know about the oil, he reflected. If I only knew how much the Major told him about me and what I was supposed to be doing here. If Cassius doesn't tell me more, be more frank about this whole matter, I'm going to ask to be allowed to finish up my own work and return to Washington. Yet he rebelled inwardly at leaving a job unfinished.

Robert Brook said uncertainly, "You think those papers are at the bottom of this attack on Slim?"

"What else could it be? Unless there was some incriminating evidence in connection with Wade's death left in the dressing-room."

"He died a natural death," the Captain said impatiently. "To all intents and purposes, that is. Why do you keep harping on that?"

David said as impatiently, "Because he was murdered and you know it. Even," he added more calmly, "if we can't prove it."

CHAPTER XV

BY one of those queer happenings that do occur more often than most persons think possible, conversation in the room when David spoke had quieted so that his voice carried easily to the far corners. Andrea, instantly alert, glanced quickly from one to another of the group to learn their reactions.

Captain Henry calmly leaned over and pulled the ash-tray towards him, seemingly no more disturbed than if David had asked him for a match. Robert, also, seemed little affected. He squirted soda into his glass without a quiver of his hand, so far as Andrea could determine. Judith leaned over and laid her hand soothingly on Sally's arm, as the younger girl uttered a shocked protest. Erica said nothing, but her face whitened until the bright lipstick she wore stood out glaringly against her pallor. Norman remained motionless, looking at the Captain as if he were a horned monster. Ann's reaction was the one that surprised Andrea the most, although she was the first to reach her as Ann—her face almost greenish in hue—toppled to the floor without a word.

"Lay her flat," Andrea admonished the Captain as he picked Ann up in his arms and put her down gently on the sofa. "Fainted from shock, I guess. She was fond of Wade." But her eyes asked questions of David as she straightened Ann's clothes and rubbed her wrists. She took the glass of whisky Robert brought her and poured a little into a spoon before holding it to the girl's white lips. "Not approved Red Cross first-aid, but then . . ." She massaged Ann's throat gently with her fingers and was relieved to see that she made an effort to swallow. "Lie still a bit," she advised as Ann opened her eyes and struggled to sit up.

"I'm all right now," Ann said, but she still looked very ill as she lay back again and closed her eyes. After a minute she opened them and with the Captain's arm to lean upon sat up and swung her legs to the floor, decorously smoothing down her

tweed skirt over plump dimpled knees. "I'd like to go home now," she said like a child.

"In just a moment," Captain Henry said gently. "I'll have Hunter drive you home. It will save your petrol," he added humorously. "You can pick up your car some other time."

"I haven't the car. I rode over on my bike," Ann explained. "We have only an A card, and I don't like to use any if I can avoid it. If we all used just a bit less petrol than we are entitled to through the rationing . . ."

"Very commendable," he said a bit dryly. "But I fear we are wandering from the subject. Wasn't there something you wanted to tell me?"

"About what?" Ann's voice was tense, her eyes were watchful and wary.

"About what made you faint."

"I think it was the heat." Ann rose unsteadily and made her way to the door. She clung to the jamb so tightly that her knuckles showed white with the intensity of her grip. "If you don't mind, Inspector?"

"Captain," he corrected glumly. As she was about to step into the loggia, "Just a minute, Mrs. Seldon. I think I should warn you, in view of what has just happened to Mr. Brook's secretary, that it isn't safe to know anything and keep it to yourself. That is almost certainly the cause of Mr. Boone's accident, for want of a better word, and may cost him his life."

"But I don't know anything, Captain."

"You surmise, which is just as bad," he said accusingly, "as far as your safety is concerned. You have children who are young and need your care. I should hate to see anything happen to you, Mrs. Seldon."

Ann drew herself up proudly. "You can't frighten me, Captain. I would help you if I could, but I cannot. I know nothing whatever, any more than you do, about what caused Wade's death." She began to walk rapidly across the tiled floor, Sergeant Hunter following closely behind her. As she neared the door, Andrea heard her talking with someone whom

she could not see, but from the answering voice she knew it was Steve Carstair to whom Ann was explaining what had occurred in the drawing-room.

Steve's voice sounded loud as he remarked that, for his part, he'd watch his step and not stick out his neck. "No use taking chances, honey," he said. Then he offered to drive her home in his car, but she refused and in a few seconds he put his head in at the door. "I understand Ann's been on the grill," he said.

Captain Henry said shortly, "Nothing of the sort. Mr. Ramsay merely remarked that Mr. Harlow was murdered, although he hadn't been able to prove it. Mrs. Ann Seldon fainted. It is my understanding," he added sarcastically, "that women don't faint without a good reason. Your greater experience might prove differently."

Erica said anxiously, "Please! Never mind potting each other. This is too serious a matter for sarcasm and personalities."

"You're right, Erica," Steve admitted soberly. To the Captain, "Sorry I baited you. Bad habit of mine. Let's have a drink all round and forget it." He was already busying himself with the decanters and the soda.

"None for me," Captain Henry said. He nodded at Steve, said good-bye to the others, his glance lingering a second longer than need be on Sally's sober face. "I'll be looking for you," he told her.

"I'll be there," she assured him. "Just as soon as things straighten out a bit here." A dimple suddenly showed in her cheek. "Does the invitation to inspect headquarters include Judy?" She ignored the darkening of Steve's face, the unfriendly manner in which he handed her a glass. He had not forgiven her for flirting with the Captain.

"Glad to have her," Captain Henry said formally. But his tone said plainly that he didn't want her, was interested only in Sally, and Andrea was pleased and amused to see the younger sister get back a bit of her own.

Two hours later Andrea, dressed for dinner, hunted in vain

among the articles on her dressing-table for her cigarette-case. She remembered having it after they left the theatre and Slim had been taken to the hospital, for she had offered Sally a cigarette in the drawing-room. She had laid it down somewhere there or it had fallen from her lap when she went to Ann's assistance.

"I'll run downstairs and look for it," she told her husband, who was brushing his hair vigorously.

"Why don't you wait until we go to dinner?" He laid down the brushes and reached for his coat. "I'll be ready in a few minutes. We can hunt for it then."

"I'll go on and wait for you at the foot of the stairs," she told him. "It's my good case—a wedding present. I couldn't bear to lose it."

Andrea trailed her thin purple cotton skirts down the stairs. Her sandals made no sound on the thick carpet, and she entered the drawing-room. It was still light enough so she could see to make her way without running into furniture, and she instinctively started towards the garden end of the room where she had been sitting with Norman. She passed a tall pier glass set into the side wall and her dim reflection startled her for an instant before she realized that it was herself she was seeing and not another woman. She stepped close to the glass and snapped on the light above it for a better look, the case she had come to find momentarily forgotten.

"It's a good thing I had an extensive trousseau," she reflected, tucking in a stray curl that persisted in escaping from the comb which held them in place. "If we stay here much longer I'll have to begin to repeat myself. I'd hate that, with Erica and Sally and Judith having so many evening changes. Still and all, with the war making so many demands on our money, I don't feel that I can buy anything else. This dress is old, but I like it." She turned from side to side, admiring the cut of the simple frock.

With her hand upraised to turn off the light over the mirror, Andrea stood still and listened, her attention attracted by voices

in the adjoining room. She had seen the morning room only once, as it was seldom used. The family disliked its old-fashioned air, Sally had told her, but Andrea had imagined that it was really Judith who despised the Victorian elegance of the faded flowery carpet, the needle point and satin and marble, for the younger girl's touch had lingered on the delicate embroidered scrolls hanging on the wall and her glance had held something in it beside dislike. Now she wondered at its being occupied.

Without thinking much more about it, Andrea went to the window, making no attempt to disguise her presence, and found her case lying on the carpet where she had dropped it. She picked it up and crossed the room, hesitated a second at the entrance to the morning room, and then decided that the couple didn't want company and she'd meet David at the foot of the stairs as she had intended.

As she turned away from the door, the heel of her sandal caught in the hem of the purple dress, and she grabbed the heavy portières that shut off the opening from the drawing-room to save herself from a fall. She disentangled the dress, pulled out the pucker in the hem, and decided it needed no repair for that evening. Without thinking, she reached out then to straighten the curtains, and stood still in sheer astonishment.

A faint light shone on the polished table and was reflected in the gleaming satin of the woman held close in Norman's arms. His fair head was bent close to the woman's own blonde locks, and he was quite oblivious to the world about him, conscious only of Erica.

As she watched, Erica broke away from his arms and put the width of a small stand between them. He made as if to follow and the actress put out her hand and held him off. "No! No!" she said impatiently. "I've told you time and again, Norman, that you must stop this foolishness."

"But you said I could kiss you," he said pleadingly.

"Because you said I reminded you of your mother, and I was sorry for you. You took advantage of it. I want you to let

me alone." Her voice softened at his evident misery. She came to him and touched him gently on the shoulder. "You mustn't give me any more gifts, either. I want you to save the money for your education."

"I'm not a child," he said sullenly. "I've finished my schooling. I'll have a good job when I go back to China. Maybe you'll think differently of me then."

Erica said patiently, "My dear boy! I'd hate to tell you how many years older than you I am. In fact, I could really be your mother. Please take this back," holding out a small opened case in which something shone with a soft radiance in the dim light, "and return it to the store. I'm sure they'd give you back your money."

"I don't want the money," Norman muttered. "I only want you."

Erica's voice hardened. "I won't listen to any more such nonsense," she said angrily. "If you persist in annoying me this way I will have to speak to Robert about it."

"Don't do that," Norman said humbly. "He'll make me go away and then I won't be able to be near you any more."

"Then forget this foolishness and let's be friends together," Erica begged. She laid her hand gently on his arm. "Come on, now. Go up and get dressed for dinner. Robert will be cross if you are late again." She tried to close his fingers over the jewel-case, but he refused to take it. "All right," with a sigh, "I'll keep these because they are so lovely. But you must promise not to make me any more presents."

Norman muttered something Andrea couldn't hear and as they turned towards the door she sped swiftly out into the loggia. She wouldn't have had Erica know she had been a witness of the scene for anything. Yet as she leaned on the newel-post, waiting for David, she wondered what the gift could have been that had prompted Erica's real anger. Surely it couldn't be anything much, on Norman's small salary. But she couldn't think of any way of finding out.

CHAPTER XVI

After dinner David suggested that Andrea should walk with him in the garden. "Not the one near the theatre," he told her with a slight grimace of disgust, "but the bayou-garden. You've no idea how beautiful it is. I didn't know it myself until I came through that way this afternoon on my way in from the office."

Andrea agreed and they slipped unnoticed from the loggia, rounded the corner of the colonnade, and entered the bayou-garden through a small white gate which looked too frail to hold up its load of blossoming scarlet trumpets. The bayou-garden was so called because before Moss Street was cut through, the garden had run down to the bayou itself. Now its farthest-most boundary was a low whitewashed wall covered with creepers and climbing cactus. The garden was long and narrow and criss-crossed with shell paths edged with leathery-leaved wax privet, now grown rank and neglected until in many cases the scraggly branches met overhead.

"Why do you suppose they don't use this garden more?" Andrea asked as they strolled slowly along. "It is infinitely more lovely than the walled garden. There's no more privacy to that than to a goldfish bowl."

David gave her a hug that lifted her clear off her feet. When he set her down again he said that he supposed the Brooks weren't as interested in privacy as she was. "Although why an old married woman like yourself needs so much privacy in public . . ." They laughed in sheer delight at being together.

"Let's sit down," Andrea suggested a few minutes later. "I've something to tell you." She repeated to him the conversation and the scene she had witnessed between Erica and Norman. "Don't you think it strange?"

"Calf love," David said laughingly. "I remember when I was his age. I had the greatest crush of all times on one of my teachers. I almost drove Uncle Phill crazy begging for more spending money to buy her presents."

"It didn't sound like that," Andrea said, remembering uneasily the tight desperate note in Norman's voice. "And he isn't so young, dear. I think both Mr. Brook and you are making a mistake about him. You're underestimating him. He was brought up in China and I think boys mature early there."

"He's an American," David reminded her. "Not a Chinese. It isn't the same thing at all."

Andrea was unconvinced.

David felt it and looked down quizzically at the head resting against his shoulder. "It isn't our funeral," he reminded her.

His wife gave up the argument. · David, once his mind was made up about anything, was hard to convince. She changed the subject, "Don't you think it strange we don't see more of the Major?"

David laughed ironically. "Not any more, I don't. I telephoned to him to-day from the office. I got the hottest run-around I've ever had in my life. But it told me one thing." He paused dramatically.

Andrea lifted her head and turned to face him. David being dramatic was something new. "What's that?"

"Did you ever play hare and hounds? Of course you did. If I'd remembered that sooner I'd have saved us a lot of trouble. Well, in this case we're the herring dragged over the trail."

Andrea, thinking back to their schooldays when David and other bigger boys had been the hounds and she the frightened hare, thought of the methods she had used to escape. She remembered the false scents she'd laid down for them to follow and knew at once what her husband meant. She wished he wasn't so bitter about it, though, even as she agreed mentally that it did seem like a foul trick.

"This is war, honey," she reminded him. "If using us to throw the guilty persons off the scent helped the Major any, gave him any leads or even any ideas as to who is selling the oil, I think we should be proud of having done our part. And Ann

did suspect us of being detectives, remember? If she did, others probably did, too."

"Just the same," David insisted doggedly, "I don't like being played for a sucker. If the Major wanted to plant us here, hoping that we would be suspected, so that his own men could pursue their investigations in private and without interference, all right. I'd have been glad to play my part, but I still think I should have been told about it."

"But if someone deceives you in a good cause, dear, don't you think it's different than playing you for a sucker, as you call it?"

"A sucker by any other name is still a sucker." David was sore and showed it. His pride was hurt. Although he hadn't said much about it, the idea that he might be instrumental in helping to track down his country's enemies had appealed to him greatly. Even though only a small cog in the machine, his part might well have proved important. Now he had decided that he and his wife had been used as bait. It rankled. "I'll never like the Major again," he said, hurt showing in his voice in spite of all attempts to hide it. "And I did like him. I respected him, too."

"I think you are being too hard on him," Andrea said unhappily. Although she had been prone to distrust the Major, illogically she felt called upon to defend him against attack. She went on, "You don't know he used us as bait. You're only guessing."

"Damned good guess," David growled. As she made a small inarticulate sound of protest, "Don't bother about it, sweet. Let's forget it. Let's talk about us." He tried to pull her down again into his arms, but she pushed his hands away.

"Even if you have guessed right, I don't see that Cassius did anything so dreadfully wrong. All is fair in love or war."

"I'll never trust him again," David muttered resentfully.

Silence fell over the garden. To the two seated on the bench it was an uncomfortable silence, fraught with uneasiness and sadness. "I hear water falling, don't you?" David said at last.

Andrea breathed a glad sigh. She couldn't bear to have the smallest cloud on their horizon. She moved closer to him. "It's the fountain. We passed it back there under the big oak." She smiled contentedly and shut her eyes as David's arms closed about her. The faint breeze lifted the curls on her temples and stirred the soft folds of her gown ; the breeze smelled of lilacs and made her think of home.

David said finally, "Odd about Ann's fainting, isn't it ? She must have known that the police suspect that Wade's death was not a natural one."

"Uh huh !" Andrea murmured sleepily.

"Don't go to sleep. I want to talk." David tugged at her curls. "What do you think made her act that way ?" He nipped his wife's ear sharply to insure her attention and had his nose tweaked in revenge.

"Fright."

"Knows something, you mean ? That's what the Captain asked her and she said she didn't."

"Threats, I imagine." Andrea sat up and lowered her voice. "Do you think it's safe to talk like this out here ?"

"Sure. Nobody could get within hearing distance of us without our knowing it. Those shells make a lot of noise when you walk on them. I noticed it when we came down from the house."

"They might cut through the shrubbery." Andrea looked about her at the rank green interlocking growth. "I don't see how anyone could get through the privet without being all scratched up, though."

"My little Sherklocko !" David said half mockingly, half in interest. "I wish I had your powers of observation, my pet."

"You observe, I use instinct," Andrea said. "To return to the subject of Ann. I don't think she really knows anything, but I think she suspects someone or something, and that she is afraid of what might happen if she tells it."

"She doesn't look like a coward."

"Not for herself. For the twins, especially Jackie."

"That means it would have to be somebody here in the house or someone she knows well," David remarked after thinking over what she had said.

Andrea agreed. "We knew it must be, anyway. Taking for granted that Wade's death is a murder and that Slim was attacked because he had become dangerous to the murderer."

"Whoa! You're assuming too much. The two crimes might not be related."

"True," Andrea conceded. "You know, dear, that little spot on Wade's shoulder." She looked at his intent face, the eyes shadowed as he bent his head to listen to her low voice. "Did it look to you like a prick from a hypodermic needle?"

David laughed. "I thought you'd tumble to that sooner or later. I told the Captain you were a doctor's daughter, as well as having studied a bit of medicine yourself, and that you'd be certain to puzzle over it. But he and Cassius swore me to secrecy. Dr. Raul and Dr. Black both said it might be caused by a hypodermic needle. But as nothing showed up in the p.m. nor since that would account for it, they didn't want it mentioned."

"You could have told me," Andrea said in a small voice, unreasonably hurt because he hadn't confided in her. Wives didn't count or they shouldn't count, anyway. "Husband aren't supposed to have secrets from their wives."

"They made such a point of it I couldn't very well break my word to them. And if something in your expression had given away the fact that you knew, you might have been in danger, too. Even if it was made by a hypodermic needle—the spot, I mean—it wouldn't have anything to do with his death, do you think? When the autopsy showed nothing?"

"It might be a poison," Andrea said, thinking hard. "There are a number that don't leave any trace. I don't remember just what they are now, I'm not much on toxicology, but I can look it up. Do you think there are any medical books in the library?"

"Doubt it. There'd be an encyclopedia there, though. I

think I noticed one the other day. Still," rising and starting with her to the house, "the doctors and the police will have gone thoroughly into that." At the garden gate he stopped and, turning, took her close into his arms. "Listen, my love ! Remember what you promised the day we were married ? You said you'd love, honour, and obey. This time I want you to do the latter."

Andrea slid her arms about his neck and laid her smooth cheek against his face. "What am I to obey ?"

"My specific order that you are not to do any sleuthing. Promise ?"

His wife murmured that of course she'd promise. With reservations, she told herself. Not even a determined husband like David would expect her to pass up a clue if it came stalking her. Or would he ?

CHAPTER XVII

ROBERT BROOK stood at his bedroom window and looked across the gaily blooming garden to the little theatre where he had spent so many happy hours. It nestled in its corner in the shade of the big tree, and looked calm and peaceful and serene.

He remarked to Cassius, sitting in a big chair near the fire, "I can't believe that all of these disagreeable, unhappy incidents are happening to me. I suppose it sounds hard and cold to say that Wade's death, apart from the tragic side of it, does not touch me as closely as it should. I liked him and I tried to be a parent, but," trusting to his friend's understanding to untangle his troubled thoughts, "I never felt for him as a father should feel towards a son, even a son by marriage."

Cassius said comfortingly, "You did all you could for Wade,

Robert." Even in his pity for the unhappy man the Major thought how characteristic it was of Brook that not even his intimate friends ever presumed to call him "Bob." He went on smoothly, "He wasn't a person to inspire great passions except in the case of people who are easily impressed by appearances or fame or something of that sort. Take Janice Lannon. She made a hero of him from the time she was a youngster—not that she is much more now. Judith's treatment of him simply made her idolize Wade the more. He became Sir Galahad and Clark Gable rolled into one."

"I can see that easily enough. I think even Judy was taken in by his looks and his charm. At first, anyway."

"Not Sally," Cassius said quickly.

His host felt a smile quivering at the corners of his mouth and he suppressed it quickly. Himself a lover, he was swift to recognize the signs in another. But although he was fond of Cassius, he had not yet made up his mind that he would like him for a son-in-law. "Opinionated," he decided, thinking that if Sally asked his advice he would suggest that she wait a while. Not that she is apt to do anything so old-fashioned, he reflected gloomily.

"Not Sally," he agreed gravely. "She doesn't care much for men. Oh, she likes them, I admit. Likes the flattery their attention provides," as Cassius eyed him sharply, "but she's still heart-whole and fancy-free, thank God!" That ought to discourage him, he thought, and was amazed when Cassius exclaimed exultantly :

"Then I may have a chance after all! That is, if you're right about it and she doesn't care seriously for Carstair." He added gloomily, "I don't suppose she'd confide in you, though. These modern young women aren't the confiding sort."

Robert agreed sulkily. His plan seemed to have backfired, but he was genuinely fond of Cassius, and if anyone had to take Sally from him, it might as well be a man as upright as the Major. Erica and he were marrying soon, anyway. He spoke of his plans to Cassius. "I'd like you to be best man."

"I'll be glad to, Robert. How do the girls feel about your marriage?"

The talk passed to purely personal matters and it was almost noon when the men went into the study. Robert sat down at his desk and picked up the 'phone. "I'll call the hospital and see if there is any more news of Slim. They said this morning that he was still alive, but that was all."

While he was telephoning, Cassius wandered into the loggia. He settled himself comfortably and lighted a cigarette, while Jason hurried to bring him a drink. Judith, on her way upstairs, saw him sitting there and came over to say hello.

"We haven't seen much of you lately. Or not so much as we used to," she said, perching on the arm of the adjoining chair and swinging her foot carelessly to and fro.

"I'm a busy man," he told her, smiling. He liked Judith. He thought she'd make a pretty nice sister-in-law once he'd broken her of the habit of pushing Sally quite so much into the background.

Judith, reading his thoughts easily, grinned at him companionably. She knew how he felt about Sally. She liked him a lot. She could have liked him even better, she thought, admiring his clean-cut face and smooth dark hair. He was a person one could confide in and she needed someone to talk to at that very moment. There were things on her conscience and other things in her subconscious that she'd been trying to bring to the surface ever since she returned from Manila.

"Cassius, if I told you something, would you keep it to yourself? Unless you absolutely had to tell it, I mean?"

"Why, of course, Judy. You know I'm always glad to listen to anything you want to tell me." He looked at her sober face and worried eyes and his own countenance became more grave. "Is it so bad?"

She nodded. "Bad enough. I don't care for myself, but Dad thinks so much of all the virtues." She told him frankly of her taking Lawrence Lannon to the theatre the night before Slim was found there, of David's knowledge of their presence and

how she had explained it to him and asked him to keep it a secret from her father. "Then, when we found Slim in the dressing-room, I had to tell them about our being there when Dad and David tried the door. I don't know how much Dad has guessed about Larry and me, but I don't want him to find out the truth if I can help it. I'm worried sick," she broke out. "I don't know what to do."

Cassius said in a low voice, "You mean there is something more your father doesn't know?"

Judith said miserably, "Heaps." She swallowed hard once, and the man saw the pulse beating heavily in the hollow of her throat. Then she lifted her eyes to his. "I'm the one that has caused all the trouble. You see, I stole Wade's brief-case."

Robert had finished his telephone conversation. In the shocked silence that followed Judith's confession, his crisp tones were heard thanking someone at the hospital for their kindness, then the click of the 'phone as he dropped the receiver back into the cradle.

"We'll have to finish this later," Cassius whispered to Judith. "Here comes your father." He turned to the older man, shielding Judith's tear-stained face from his gaze. "How is Slim?"

Robert indicated there had been no change.

From the corner of his eye Cassius could see Judith industriously powdering her nose and erasing the signs of tears. In a moment she remarked calmly that since Slim was no better and no worse, he at least had a fair chance. "Anyone else would have been dead by now."

"You sound heartless, Judith," her father said reprovingly. "Why do you always show people your worst side?"

"She simply means that if he's lived this long the chances are in his favour," Cassius explained smoothly. "How about lunching with me, Judy? I haven't had a chance to see much of you since you came home."

"I'd like to, Cassius, thanks. It won't take me a minute to get ready." She raised her hand in a gay salute to Steve, who

came walking briskly into the loggia. "Hi, Steve. Whither away?"

"Vacationing again?" Robert asked.

Steve flushed. "I thought I'd run home, and then take Sally downtown for lunch. I had some papers I wanted to pick up, anyway, and as I have to eat I might as well kill two birds with one stone." He didn't elaborate on the two birds, but Cassius translated it as meaning that he could eat and make love to Sally at one and the same time. It infuriated him. Yet he kept his voice cool as he questioned Steve.

"I'm glad you came in, Carstair. I've been wanting to ask if you have any idea how Mr. Brook's fishing rod happened to be in the theatre? You two are the only men around here who ever do any fishing."

Steve shrugged and laid the plain white box he was holding in Judith's lap. "Saw these in a florist's window and brought them along. Thought they might remind you of Manila. I brought Sally a box the night you came home." To Cassius, "Sorry I can't help you. I have my own rod. I wouldn't think of touching Uncle Robert's without asking his permission."

"It was just an idea," Cassius admitted, his eyes on the moth orchids Judith was lifting from their nest of tissue-paper. "Those are exquisite." He touched one of the delicate waxy blooms with his forefinger. "Wear them, will you?"

As Judith started to her room to dress her father said, "Judy, you aren't forgetting that we have a guest, are you?"

"Mrs. Ramsay?" Judith grinned at him so that Cassius, watching, thought no one in the world would have guessed that the impudent gamine smile concealed fear and heartache and, if he was not wrong, something almost akin to panic. "Nobody could forget that redhead for long." She climbed a step or two and flung over her shoulder, "She's Sally's for to-day. I had her yesterday."

Robert said worriedly, "No sense of responsibility. I sometimes wonder what will happen to her."

"Don't worry too much," Cassius answered quietly. "There

is fine stuff in Judith. She'll come through okay." Hope to God I'm right, he was thinking desperately. Why, oh why, did she have to pick a Military Intelligence man to confide in? I'm duty bound to go through with it now, but how am I going to keep my promise to Judy and do my duty by the Captain?

"The Ramsays are restless," Robert said unexpectedly, with an astuteness that always surprised his friends, who considered him pompous, phlegmatic, and not overly sensitive. "David knows that we used him as a decoy or blind or whatever you want to label it, and I suspect that he's told that cute little wife of his."

"They've about served their purpose. I'm thinking of letting Ramsay go back to Washington as soon as he finishes his work downtown. Now that we have a line on how the oil business is handled, it won't be long before we close in on the gang. The only thing we have yet to learn," he added ruefully, "is which one of your office employees is selling you out."

"As certain it's an office employee as that, are you?" Robert asked quickly.

Cassius flushed. "Almost certain. I could be wrong, of course. But I gave up the idea of it being one of your family some time ago." His eyes didn't meet Robert's. "Can it be Judith he's so worried about?" he thought.

"Clever of Mrs. Ramsay to tumble to how it was done," Robert ruminated. "She's a smart girl. She's been mighty patient killing time around here, waiting for her husband to finish an assignment like this. Not many women on their honeymoon would have been willing to do it." He sighed as he started to retrace his steps towards the study. "Must see she gets a nice present. See you later, Cassius."

They lunched in a tiny restaurant on Royal Street in the Vieux Carré. Judith sat so she could see into the garden, where great clumps of mimosa leaned enticingly over a tiny artificial pool in the tiled court. Wistaria vines climbed the open colonnade that

ran about the patio and entered the second-story window by way of the roof. The vine was said to be many years old and the stem was as thick as Judith's arm.

Cassius, seeing that Judith, in spite of her outward composure, was too upset to do any thinking for herself, ordered sherry and an omelette, and, after the waiter had brought the wine, urged her to drink it. "A bit of colour that belongs to you and not to the drugstore won't do you any harm."

Judith eyed him gratefully. "You're kind, Cassius. For all that Mrs. Ramsay is always talking about your 'lean and hungry look.'"

Cassius laughed outright and many persons at the small tables scattered about the room turned to look at the lovely woman, in thin expensive black with a tiny white hat folded like wings on her black hair, and the austere Major in olive drab whose appearance apparently belied him.

"I didn't know I'd made such an impression on Mrs. Ramsay," he told her, the remnants of the smile still crinkling the tanned skin about his dark eyes. "She's smarter than her husband, isn't she, although he's no fool, I can tell you." He was talking idly, giving her time to marshal her thoughts and strength for the confession she must make.

Judith shook her head. "Not smarter. She talks more, that's all." Unconsciously her mind had been taken for a second from her own troubles and she relaxed. "I like him."

"So do I," Cassius agreed. "I feel like a cad to use him as a herring, but I thought it might work and it has. I hope he won't hold it against me, although I think he's feeling pretty sore this minute."

"Let's not put off talking about me any longer," Judith said, pushing aside her plate with the scarcely touched golden omelette and its accompanying mound of fragrant mushrooms. "I sent the messenger for the brief-case because Wade told me he'd found a lot of incriminating evidence against someone very close to Uncle Robert that would paralyse him when he heard about it. He also said that Herbert had made another will. I was cut

off with only a small allowance and the money was to be divided among Ann and the twins."

Cassius listened in silence as she talked on, telling him how furiously jealous Herbert had been of other men's attentions to her, how he had threatened time and again to cut her off without a dollar "more than the law allows you." He'd always got over these rages, however, before any harm had been done. But shortly before his death he'd discovered her in compromising circumstances with a friend of his and had in a tantrum drawn up and mailed a new will to Taylor and Harlow.

"The Judge must know about it, then," Cassius said thoughtfully. "Why didn't he say something? Wait a bit, Judy. Something's wrong. Your husband's will was offered for probate and in it you receive most of the property. The twins get only a small sum—small in comparison to the rest of the estate."

"That's what is so odd about it." She told him about the controversy over the Youba stock and how Wade had left the stock she had turned over to him upon their marriage to the twins. "He had no actual moral right to do that, of course. Dad was furious at the time, but he's gotten over it now. He says if Jack is anything like his father he'll be glad to sell back the stock when he comes of age." She broke a domino of sugar daintily in half and dropped one piece into her coffee cup. "Why should Wade tell me such a thing if it weren't true? And I think it must have some basis of fact because before Herbert died he kept begging me to forgive him and repeated over and over that he didn't mean it. Neither the doctors nor I could imagine what he meant."

"I suspect he sent the changes in his will in the form of a letter, asking his attorneys to draw it up in legal form. The will probably never was signed."

"Then why would Wade tell me about it?"

Cassius sighed wearily. "The ways of the Wades of this world are beyond my understanding. To put himself into your good graces, perhaps. He did ask you to marry him again,

remember, even if you did minimize its importance to save Janice's pride. How is Jan, by the way?"

"Not very well. Larry sent her north for a bit. He thought a change of scene would help."

"Warren Sand will have his innings eventually," Cassius predicted. "He's a nice boy. But he couldn't compete against Wade."

Judith said with a wry smile, "Are M.I. men always so tactful to their victims, Cassius? You aren't asking about the brief-case nor how I tried to secure it."

"Nothing is ever gained by impatience, Judy. I try to teach our operatives that, but am not always successful. I suppose you just left some money on the counter of a Western Union office and asked in a note that the case be collected, with a letter to Slim signed by a faked signature good enough to fool him. He never thought to examine it carefully, of course, as it was on Youba letterhead paper." I ought to be horrified at what she's done, he reflected.

"That's about it," Judith said wearily. "I told the messenger to leave the brief-case at the Youba offices. I knew it would be past hours and that all of the staff would be gone, or most of them, anyway, as it was the night of the dress rehearsal for *The Black Crook*. I expected the watchman to sign for it and knew he would leave it on Dad's desk in his office. I," she said with a wry smile, "remember how things work in the office. And Dad is a creature of routine. He never would change anything."

"How did you intend to get into the office to get the brief-case?" Cassius asked, restraining his impulse to hurry her along to the point of saying what had happened to the case.

"I did get in," she replied simply. "I didn't want to sign in because then my name would show on the register and Wade would know at once what became of the papers. So I climbed up the fire escape and crawled through a window with a broken latch. I gambled on the fact that Dad wouldn't have had it fixed because it opened into an old unused storeroom and he

probably never would have thought of it. It was open and I went into his office and the brief-case wasn't there." She raised her great black eyes inquisitively to his face. "What did you do with it?"

Cassius' eyes opened wide in astonishment. "I?"

"The police. You found it first, didn't you?" At his look of dismay, "But somebody had been there before me and taken it. I heard them leaving the office when I was crawling through the window. I opened the door and looked into the corridor and he must have been hiding somewhere because I didn't see a soul. But I heard the fire escape creak when I went into Dad's room, so I know he got away all right. I thought it was someone you had sent—I heard you making such a fuss when David wanted to get it that night that I knew you'd already sent for it."

"So that's it," Cassius said bitterly. "Who in hell took it? And what was in those papers beside the will that caused Wade to be so excited? He'd found out something. That means he was a menace to that person's safety and so he had to die. But how was he killed?" He'd been thinking aloud, his face lined with worry. At the moment he felt he hated and despised her.

"Did the police find the messenger?" Judith asked timidly.

"Oh, yes. It happened just as you have told me." He looked searchingly at her pale lovely face. "Judy, what did you intend to do with the will and those papers if you did get the brief-case?"

"I was going to look at the will and then give it to Judge Taylor. Truly I was. But money is awfully nice to have, Cassius. I don't know how I'd get along if I had to make my own living." She lighted a cigarette and smoked thoughtfully, relieved that the worst of the questioning was over.

Cassius ventured to ask the questions to which he'd been leading up. "What were the other papers Wade was so excited about? Did he give you any hints? Any idea of whom they might incriminate?"

Judith said reluctantly, "None. I do wish I could help."

People at the adjoining tables were twisting in their seats turning to stare at a group threading their way slowly toward the empty table near the window, next to which Cassius and Judy were sitting. Cassius turned to look also and said laughingly, "Well! Look who's here. Mrs. Ramsay, a knockout in green, our little Sally turning all heads in pale yellow, and our brave Captain Henry." His relief at seeing that the girls were with the Captain instead of Steve was apparent at once to Judith's sharp eyes.

She said quickly, "I don't think Sally really cares much about Steve. She thought she liked Larry, but she'll get over that also." She waved and smiled in answer to their greetings "Steve is furious, I bet. Wait until he finds he was turned down in favour of the Captain." She added, half to herself, "Steve worries me."

Cassius turned to her at once, "What do you mean, Judy?"

Judy picked up purse and gloves, and bit her lip a second in contemplation. "I don't think I want to talk about it now, Cassius."

"Let me know when you change your mind, Judy."

"Of course." As they rose to cross to the Captain's table, "Do you have to tell him?"

"I can't keep anything from the police, Judy," Cassius said in a low voice. "But he won't say anything about it unless he must. Trust him to do the square thing." He raised his voice gaily. "Is this the way you spend the taxpayers' money, Captain Henry?" he asked maliciously.

CHAPTER XVIII

CAPTAIN HENRY only smiled in answer to the Major's greeting. He held a chair for Judith and asked the waiter to bring another for Cassius. "Drink?"

"We've finished, thanks," Judith told him. "Unless the Major?"

"Nothing more for me." Cassius turned to Sally so naïvely that both Andrea and Judith could hardly keep from laughing. Their eyes met and each knew what the other was thinking.

"What happened to Steve?" Judith asked.

Andrea answered that he had gone back to the office. "Your father needed him, I think." She smiled slightly. "We had business at the police station and he didn't want to come along, so we drove down in Sally's car. He was quite put out," she added demurely.

"So I should imagine," Judith said dryly. "But what business did you have at the police station? I judge it couldn't be very much of a secret, if Steve knew about it."

"Oh, he didn't know anything about it. He thought Sally was coming down to see the Captain," Andrea said, laughing. She made no attempt, however, to answer Judith's question and the girl looked at her sharply but didn't repeat it.

Cassius was talking with the Captain. "Some things have come up that I think you should know about. If you're not tied up for the rest of the afternoon, I'd like to talk them over with you."

Captain Henry agreed. "Miss Sally can drive Mrs. Ramsay and her sister home. We can go over to my office, if that is all right with you." He said in a congratulatory tone, "This little lady," indicating the blushing Sally, "has done a nice bit of detective work. She succeeded in turning in a piece of information and an object that may go a long way towards solving the case."

Cassius said in surprise, "Sally?" And to her, "How did that happen, honey?"

That morning Sally had awakened very early. She had not

been sleeping well of late, worrying about Wade's death, Judith's behaviour—when had she not worried about it?—and the state of tension into which the people with whom she was most closely associated appeared to have fallen.

She turned over and buried her black curls in the pillow, but before her eyes kept recurring the picture of Wade lying so still on the dressing-room floor, the still newer vision of Slim lying in almost the same position. He's been struck over the head, of course, but what could have ailed Wade? To take her mind off the more sinister aspects of the case she tried to imagine how all her favourite detectives would have gone about solving the cause of death. The first thing they would do would be to search the theatre, she decided. Most likely the police had overlooked something.

Sally breakfasted in her room, drinking more coffee than she wanted in her impatience for David to be up and gone to his office. She was going to enlist Andrea's aid if she could possibly convince her that there was anything in the idea of searching the theatre. "A woman naturally would think of lots of places to look for evidence that would never occur to a man," she was going to tell her.

By nine o'clock she was dressed in a slack suit with a bandanna tied over her curls. At nine-fifteen she heard David telling his wife good-bye, and to be good and remember her promise. She waited until she heard the big doors slam shut in the loggia and then sped down the hall to the Ramsays' room.

Andrea called "Come in," in answer to her knock, and she slipped through the half-opened door with the pleasurable feeling of a real conspirator. But once there, she didn't quite know how to begin and looked at Andrea helplessly.

"What is it?" Andrea was pulling a turtle-necked sweater over her head and her voice came muffled from among the woollen folds. She settled it in place and turned to see why Sally, ordinarily so talkative, hadn't answered her question.

"I've an idea," Sally said, breathlessly taking the plunge. "I want to search the theatre for whatever it was that killed

Wade. I think if we went down and looked we might find something.

Andrea shook her head decidedly. David was stopping at the police station to-day to talk their poison theory over with Captain Henry. They would give the theatre another going over, of course. Aloud she said, "I imagine whoever did it—always taking into consideration the fact that we may be wrong after all—took away with him all the evidence."

Sally said eagerly, "But I'm sure there are lots of places where the police wouldn't think of looking. You know all those beams above the stage?" As Andrea looked blank, "The canvas scenery makes the ceiling for the stage sets—it has to be that way—but if the canvas ceiling is down there are beams and things at the roof." At Andrea's nod, "I'll bet they never thought of looking up there."

Andrea said thoughtfully, a faint scowl between her brows, "I see your point, of course. But how are we going to hunt along beams? I'm not going to crawl up and down a lot of ladders, and I won't let you do it, either." Yet she was tempted. Her promise to David receded further and further into the inner recesses of her mind. After all, she had stipulated "unless a clue came stalking her." And this was something on that order. "Anyway, we can't get in. The policeman has strict orders from Captain Henry. He wouldn't dare to disobey."

"A fig for Captain Henry," Sally said gaily, seeing that the cute little Mrs. Ramsay, as she always thought of her, was weakening in her resolve. "I'll fix it. I'll have Cook call him into the kitchen for something especially good. He can sit at the window and watch the front door of the theatre. We can crawl in the window at the back. It has a trick lock on it and I can pry the catch open with a piece of wire. I've done it before when the door blew to and we had left the key inside."

Andrea knew she was gone and pushed her conscience away from her. "It's in a good cause," she told it. "David wouldn't really want me to overlook any bets." She followed Sally's impatient steps and almost ran into Erica, standing close to

Robert's study door. Erica moved away at once and Andrea was not certain whether she had been inside the study or was just about to knock. She could hear the mumble of voices and knew that someone was in there with Robert.

"The Major arrived early, I guess," Erica said, fingering the strand of small pearls about her neck. "He's in there with Robert now. I wanted to ask if there had been any word from Slim?"

"He's just the same," Andrea said automatically, her eyes on the gleaming string about the woman's firm white throat. "I don't know when I've seen such a beautiful string of pearls. How proud you must be of them." Robert must have given them to her, she thought. I do hope I can have some like them later on.

"They are nice," Erica agreed, touching them gently. "But they aren't real—that is, they are Japanese culture pearls. I suppose I should not wear them, considering the war, but they looked so well on me I couldn't resist."

"They are the best-looking culture pearls I ever saw," Andrcia said admiringly. "Did you buy them here?" forgetting her rudeness in her interest. She was embarrassed, therefore, when Erica replied stiffly that they were a present.

"I suppose you think because I'm a German that I'm also in league with Japan?" She looked as if she were about to cry, and her nerves seemed strained to the breaking-point.

"I didn't know you were a German," Andrea protested, more upset over the situation than Erica. "I'm sorry I asked about the pearls, but they were so lovely I couldn't help it. I didn't mean to pry." She blundered on, "I thought you were an American, naturalized."

Later, as they made their way across the garden, she spoke to Sally about Erica's strange behaviour.

Sally nodded. "She's naturalized. Dad told me she had her final papers. But she isn't a bit like herself lately, I agree with that. Did you hear her raving the other night in the loggia? She was furious with Wade because she said he

'hogged' all her scenes. Usually she is so sweet and calm. I wish she'd confide in me, tell me what is worrying her."

"So that's what Erica was so angry about," Andrea thought. "I must remember to tell David." She glanced over her shoulder, but the policeman at the window was still occupied with his food. "Is this the window?" as they arrived at the back of the theatre. They worked in silence for a while. "More of a job than I thought," Sally admitted, gritting her teeth in exasperation as the window stubbornly refused to budge: the catch still held firmly. "There must be some way of getting it open. I did it before."

"Let me try." Andrea stood on the garden chair they had dragged beneath the window and slid the wire carefully through the opening between the two sashes and around the edge of the catch. The hook she had bent on the end of the wire caught and she pulled gently until the catch released. "That did it." She shoved strongly on the bottom sash and it flew up with a bang, leaving her standing startled on the teetering chair. "Run to the corner and see if the policeman heard that noise."

"All quiet on the front," Sally reported, returning and boosting Andrea through the window. She followed quickly, and soon the two girls were moving as soundlessly as possible down the dusty corridor towards the dressing-rooms and the stage which lay beyond. "Mrs. Taylor telephoned this morning. To see how Slim was getting along. She and the Judge are coming to dinner to-night."

"They're an interesting couple. Who else is coming?"

"Warren Sand. He's worried about Janice so Dad asked him up to the house. And Ann, of course." Taking two small flashlights from her pocket, she handed one to Andrea. "Keep it pointed down so if the light should touch any of the windows in the main theatre, the guard won't see it. He might investigate, although I hope he'll be so full of pancakes and sausage that he won't be able to move for a while."

"Want me to search the dressing-room?"

"Would you, Andy?" Sally asked gratefully. "There, I've

gone and said it. I knew I'd do it sooner or later. Your name was just meant to be shortened."

"David often calls me Andy and so does my dad," Andrea assured her, smiling to herself at Sally's evident relief at not being forced to search the dressing-room where Wade had died and Slim had lain so long unconscious. "I like it. Why don't you just call me Andy and be done with it? Mrs. Ramsay is so formal."

"That's what I think," Sally said, and began diligently playing her flashlight along the corridor walls. Andrea started in on the dressing-room, keeping her eyes turned away from the brown spot on the floor.

At the end of an hour's intensive searching they had found nothing at all that could in any way have contributed to Wade's death or to Slim's accident. "No luck, I guess," Sally said dismally. She brushed the hair out of her eyes with the back of her slim tanned hand; cobwebs lay across the shoulders of her jacket and a big dusty streak marked the perky bow of her bandanna.

"Oh, we can't give up so easily," Andrea said, undaunted. "Now that we've started let's do a good job." She tilted back her head and squinted up at the canvas ceiling that roofed the set of *The Black Crook*, still in place on the stage. "What can we poke about with? There must be a pole or something."

"The fish pole! Just the thing. I'll run down front and get it. It's still standing in the corner, or was when they carried Slim out. I don't think Dad took it to the house." Sally ran lightly across the stage.

"Watch the guard!" Andrea warned.

Sally waved that she understood and vanished through the heavy swinging doors that led to the main lobby.

"No smoking except on stage," Andrea reminded herself and sat down in a chair to enjoy a cigarette and wait for Sally. She put out the light of her flash to save the battery and relaxed in the warm dark. If she could only have an inspiration about the brief-casc, which to her seemed even more important than

finding out how Wade met his death. But none came and she was almost asleep when Sally came tiptoeing down the aisle, her flashlight held down to light the carpet before her.

"No nerves," she said admiringly when she reached Andrea's side. "Most women would have been scared to stay here alone. The guard is still sitting in the kitchen window. He looks half doped. Cook promised to feed him plenty. Here's the rod," holding out the fish pole. "You know, I bet whoever brought this here used it for the same purpose we want it." She stood back and shoved the slender tip as far as it would go over the canvas ceiling. But all their experiments proved in vain. If anything had been hidden there it had been found and taken away.

Andrea dusted off her dirty hands and brushed at a streak of sooty black on her once clean sweater. "Want to call it a day?" She was hot and tired and wanted now nothing so much as a hot bath.

"I can't bear to give up." Sally gave one of the ropes a vindictive jerk. It slid a few inches beneath her fingers and stopped caught somehow where the pulley was fastened to the roof. The girl gave another harder yank. "Hold your light so I can see what's the matter, Andy. It's stuck or something."

Andrea held up the light obligingly. "Pull on the other rope. Pulleys roll either way."

Sally did as she was told and the rope began to come down smoothly and lay in a loose coil at her feet. Long before it reached her eager hands she could see that something small and glittering was tied into a loop in the rope. It was a hypodermic syringe—fastened securely with needle point down and syringe part up, its position preventing the plunger from falling out.

Andrea's hands shook with excitement, now that a real clue actually was in their possession. The flashlight wobbled and threw long shadows over the scene as Sally struggled to release the delicate instrument without touching it.

"Finger-prints!" she admonished, holding it carefully in her

handkerchief. "Not that there will be any. People don't leave them any more. Only in stories, if the author is stuck for a way to catch his man."

"What are you going to do with it?" Andrea asked, wondering what she would say if Sally refused to turn it over to the police.

But that was Sally's intention. She wanted it to reach Captain Henry as quickly as possible. "Let's tell him first of all," she begged, and Andrea agreed, although she was dying to let David know.

They made their way to the house as quickly as possible, leaving the window closed but unlocked. "Nobody knows about it except the family," Sally explained carelessly, so intent on her prize that she was scarcely conscious of what she was saying. "That's what made the mark on Wade's shoulder, don't you think?"

Steve came and asked Sally to go downtown to lunch before the girls were ready to leave. He was annoyed at her refusal, angered still more when she suggested he accompany her to the police station, and she heard him snap something bitter and tart to her father as he passed the study door. "I won't be in to dinner," he had added more graciously. "Thanks just the same, Uncle Robert."

Her father had been standing in the loggia when they came downstairs. His face was troubled, but he smiled at their eager expressions and bright eyes. "Have a good time," he admonished them. "You're only young once." Sally turned back and kissed him fondly.

"Everything all right, Dad?"

"I guess so. Slim's just the same and Cassius seemed to think that meant he'd have a chance. But Steve's changed lately. Or else I imagine it." He passed his hand impatiently over his tired eyes. "And two or three times lately I've caught Erica crying." He asked hesitatingly, "There's been no trouble with you girls?"

"None," Sally said, surprised.

Robert said awkwardly, "Well, I just thought maybe Judy . . ."

Later, sitting at the wheel of her runabout, she said to Andrea, "He's such a pet. I can't bear to have him worried. You don't think it's serious, Andy? About Erica, I mean. I think Steve is just cross because he can't monopolize me."

"I agree about Steve. He'll get over it. As for Erica, she does act touchy, but I think perhaps it might be temperament. She was disappointed over the failure to produce *The Black Crook*, Wade's death and Slim being hurt upset her, and she's very much in love with your father. All of which might account for her conduct, don't you think?"

Sally said gravely that it might indeed. "You do think she loves Dad and isn't just after the money?"

Andrea was sure of that and said so. "Unless she is a much greater actress than I think, greater than a Dusé, for instance. I don't question her sincerity where your father is concerned."

They pulled up in front of the Criminal District Court Building and Sally tipped an attendant liberally to park the car for them. The majestic colonnade supporting an entablature lent dignity and beauty to the building, and the girls were impressed with the imposing entrance on Tulane Avenue. They inquired for Police Headquarters and were directed to it by a uniformed officer.

Captain Henry picked up Sally's story from thereon. "They walked in as pert as you please," he told the listeners. "Miss Sally pulled a handkerchief with something carefully wrapped in it from her purse and laid it down on my desk. 'There you are, Captain,' she said. 'Now tell us what he died of.'"

Cassius chuckled in sympathy. "Toxicology department got it now, I suppose?"

Captain Henry nodded. "There were no finger-prints on the hypodermic, although the girls were careful not to touch it with their bare hands in case there might be. But there was a bit of white powder around the barrel of the instrument. Whatever

the liquid had been, it had dried in that fashion. Dr. Black is sure it can be analyzed. I'm expecting the report later this afternoon."

On impulse Sally said, "Why don't you come to dinner, Captain? You can tell us what it is then?"

Although Judith warmly seconded the invitation the Captain regretfully refused. "I have so many reports to make out that I don't dare take the time. Later on, if I may." He held Sally's coat as they rose to leave the restaurant. "If you get any more ideas, though, I'd suggest that you send for me. You might not fool a murderer as easily as you did my guard." His tone was light, but the listeners knew instinctively that the burly well-fed officer would have some explaining to do.

CHAPTER XIX

DINNER was over and coffee had been served in the loggia. The guests were scattered about the huge colonnade much as they had been the first night the Ramsays had come to the Brooks's old plantation house, Palmetto Walk. Only this time Steve and Janice were absent, and Judith—a vision of loveliness in white satin and pearls and much too elegant for a simple home dinner—was there in their stead.

Judith sat by herself on a small cushioned seat built across the corner near the big doors that led to the bayou-garden and the drive. The orchids Steve had given her that morning, still fresh and waxy and faintly fragrant, were pinned at her breast. Warren Sand, his ginger-coloured hair on end where he had run impatient fingers through it, had been watching her for some time. Twice he had half risen from his seat beside David, as if to go across to her to make amends for his show of ill-temper on the night Wade died.

"Might as well get it over with," David said *sotto voce*. "It has to be done, so there's no use putting it off."

Warren grinned wryly. He twisted one of the moth orchids that had fallen from Judith's corsage relentlessly between his fingers. "I know. Foul of me, wasn't it? Uncle Robert was tops about it. He read me a lecture that I'll never forget, but he never even hinted that my job was at stake. It wasn't just because Judy was his daughter, either. He'd have felt the same way if I'd insulted any other woman." He twisted the stem until the head of the flower dropped to the floor. As he picked it up David said, to change the subject:

"I looked all over downtown to-day to see if I could find a florist who sold those orchids. Andrea has taken a fancy to them. It's so seldom she asks for anything that I'd like to get them for her. Have you any idea where they can be found?"

Warren shook his head. "Steve said rather vaguely that he saw them in a florist's. I hunted for them, too, all along Canal Street. No luck. I wanted them for Jan when she went north. She's so fond of flowers. But all the florists I asked said they didn't grow them. One man told me I might be able to get them at the home of a Japanese who lives near the oil tank farm. He has a truck garden there, or he did have until the war—I don't know what has happened to him since—and grew these moth orchids as a hobby."

Andrea, who had heard the last remark, sat on the arm of her husband's chair and laid her arm carelessly along its back behind him. "Did you find any place where they can be bought, Warren? I meant to look for them myself when Sally and I were out this noon."

David repeated what Warren had told him. "That's strange, isn't it? Steve brought those to Judith this morning, and left a box for Erica at the same time. Judy told me so. There must be some florist who carries them and we've overlooked it." She slid off the chair arm and trailed her long skirts gracefully over the tiles.

Warren watched her go with a smile in his eyes. "Congratulations," he said softly.

"I think so myself," David admitted proudly.

"Well, duty calls," Warren said after a minute's silence. He rose and crossed the loggia purposefully and with a smile sat down beside Judith.

She moved over amiably to make room for him. Judith never held a grudge. Now she said quietly, "Well, how goes it, pal?"

Warren's face flushed. "All right, I guess. Judy," he swallowed in embarrassment. "Judy, I wrote and apologized for what I said the other night, but I still feel like a heel. I don't know what more to say."

"Forget it. I understood."

"You're tops." The man meant what he said. Few women, he thought, would have forgiven him. Or if they had they would have taken it out on him in other ways. He cleared his throat. "Where's Lawrence?"

Judith laughed softly. "Behind the palms, talking with Erica. Don't you see Dad sitting glowering at the nest from his corner?"

Warren looked where she pointed. Robert and Andrea were apparently engrossed in conversation, but Robert's glance kept straying from the girl's vivid face to the spot where his fiancée and the novelist were partially concealed from view behind a huge clump of potted palms. As he watched, Mrs. Taylor and the Judge joined Andrea and Robert.

"Now he's trapped for fair," Warren chuckled, as the Judge's wife at once took control.

Judith agreed indifferently. "What ails Norman? He looks as if he'd lost his only friend."

"I think Mr. Brook would do well to send him back to China," Warren declared. "He is going to have trouble if he doesn't."

"What do you mean?"

"He's madly in love with Erica. Surely you've noticed.

But I suppose you haven't had much chance to observe them since you've been home."

Judith said unbelievingly, "He's only a boy. You must be mistaken." She frowned at the complication this might cause in her father's life. She herself had caused him many unhappy hours, for which she was sincerely sorry although she didn't seem to be able to help continuing with her scrapes, but she didn't want anyone else to hurt him. "I wonder if I should speak to Erica?"

"Where angels fear to tread?" Warren asked warily.

"All she can do is to tell me to mind my own business. And it is my affair, in a way. Dad's happiness is mighty important to me. I've been so pleased thinking that he was going to marry again and get some fun out of life. He's worked hard and with mother dying so young, he never really has lived."

"I think Erica will resent it," Warren said doubtfully. "Why don't you ask Steve Carstair to talk with her?"

Judith's black eyes opened wide. "Steve? What has he to do with her? He hasn't known her long. I wouldn't think of it. She'd never forgive such an intrusion upon her personal affairs from a comparative stranger."

"Where do you get that stranger stuff?" Warren asked in bewilderment. "Erica and Steve are old friends."

"Are you sure? She didn't actually say so, but she gave me to understand that she'd met Steve here. I thought she meant for the first time, of course." She raised her hand and beckoned to Andrea, who had broken away from the group with the Judge and Mrs. Taylor, and was heading for the stairs. As Andrea obediently approached, "Did you know that Steve and Erica were old friends?"

Andrea shook her head unbelievingly. "You must be mistaken. Why, they are most formal with each other, not at all as if they had a friendship of long standing. Sally will know, if it's important."

Sally, called into the conference, said flatly that they didn't know each other at all. "I introduced them myself. He did

say," she added thoughtfully, "that Erica looked like a dear friend he'd known in the Philippines. He mentioned her blonde hair and said he'd never have thought that two women in the world could be so blessed."

"Erica was in the Philippines," Andrea said decidedly. "Don't you remember, the first night David and I were here for dinner, she spoke about Judith's orchids? Not Judith's," correcting herself, "but some like them that Steve had brought to Sally. They were in a huge bowl on the table and she said something about the hills of Luzon now being white with them."

"That's right," Warren agreed. "But apart from that I know there is something between them because I saw her giving him a package one night. She called him 'Steve' and said it was all she could do and he mustn't bother her any more." He looked uncomfortable. "I shouldn't be telling tales, of course. But I can't bear to have Mr. Brook taken in by . . ." he stumbled on, "he's been so good to me."

"I don't know what to do," Judith said. "What do you think, Sally?"

It was an odd experience to see the older, harder woman suddenly appealing to the younger one. Sally straightened her shoulders and took her sister's slim fingers comfortingly in her own. "I'm going to call Captain Henry and ask him to look into it. I'm going to have him investigate Steve, too."

"Oh, no!" Judith exclaimed, shocked. "Dad will never forgive you . . . us, if you do. Steve is the son of his old friend. We mustn't do that, Sally."

"I'm going to telephone him, just the same," Sally insisted doggedly. "If there is nothing wrong, neither Erica nor Steve will know anything about it. And if Dad finds it out I'll take the blame."

Judith pleated and unpleated the handkerchief she held in her fingers. "It does seem funny," she admitted, "that it was Erica's sword-blade that hurt Wade when it was supposed to be

so dull and harmless, and her handkerchief that covered Slim's face. And now with this business Warren is telling about Norman being in love with her . . . ”

Ann Seldon, who had come quietly up to them without their hearing her, asked curiously, “ Who is Norman in love with ? He certainly looks mighty unhappy.”

Judith explained the situation to her in a low voice. “ What do you think ? ”

“ It could be.” Ann leaned carelessly against the door jamb. She had entirely recovered from her illness of the previous afternoon and seemed her usual calm, apple-cheeked self. The blue of her simple dinner dress brought out the blue of her eyes and the gold of her hair. “ I've seen him pick up a flower that she dropped and hold it, as if he hated to put it down ; once I actually saw him recover one that she'd thrown away and put it in his pocket.”

“ Calf love tactics,” Warren said, nodding. Lowering his voice, “ Be careful. Here come Mr. and Mrs. Judge.”

“ Conference ? ” Mrs. Taylor asked, taking the seat Judith indicated at her other side.

“ Not exactly.” Warren offered his seat to the Judge, but that gentleman declined it quickly.

“ I want to talk with Judith,” he explained. “ Business,” as Mrs. Taylor indicated that she saw no reason why he couldn't talk with Judith then and there.

“ Surely, Atwood, you have no secrets from your wife ! ”

“ Now, now,” the Judge said patiently, taking Judith's arm to lead her away. “ Don't excite yourself, my dear. It is bad for your indigestion.”

Andrea stayed talking for a few minutes longer, but as soon as the group showed signs of breaking up, she signified to David that she was tired and ready to retire. He joined her in a few minutes and in spite of their good resolutions, they drifted to the warm darkness of the balcony.

Unless this case breaks soon, Andrea reflected, we're apt to be here for the balance of our lives. I don't see why we ever

were put here in the first place. We're washouts as herrings, let alone investigators. David has a right to be sore.

"What mischief are you plotting now?"

"What do you mean?" Andrea asked anxiously. David had been very nice about her breaking her promise, or what he considered had been her promise, not to do any sleuthing. He had been so pleased at their finding the hypodermic that he hadn't scolded her nearly as much as she'd expected. Just the same, she thought there was a slight hint of frostiness in his manner and had done everything she could think of to dispel it.

"Can't I come up to bed early without being accused of plotting something?"

"Other women might, but not you," David said gloomily. "I know you far too well for my own peace of mind."

Andrea told him what Warren had said and about Ann's noticing how Norman picked up and treasured the flower Erica had dropped.

"Poor youngster," David said pityingly. "From what Robert tells me, he has had a hard time. But of all ironic things—to fall in love with his benefactor's fiancée!"

Andrea agreed. She thought about it in silence for a bit and then her thoughts turned to Steve and his supposed friendship with Erica. "How do you account for that?"

David shrugged and then realized she couldn't see him in the dark and answered that he couldn't. "Unless she had an affair with him and doesn't want Brook to find it out."

"What a pure mind you have," his wife said. "I could think up a better reason than that myself."

"For instance?" David asked lazily, reaching for her hand.

She curled her fingers about his and leaned her head against his shoulder, watching a bright star travelling slowly across the heavens. "Well, Erica might be an enemy agent, furnishing information about anything she could pick up here in America to Steve. He could pass it on to other agents."

"Not so good," David said decidedly. "I can't see Erica . . ." He broke off as Andrea sat up quickly, knocking his pipe

from his hand in her excitement. He rescued the pipe and said crossly, "What in time ails you, honey? That's my good meerschaum. It might have been broken." He knocked out the ashes and thrust it into his pocket. "What is it?" he asked in a different tone, realizing that Andrea didn't even know what she had done.

"That's it! That is just what is happening. That accounts for the oil being stolen and everything." She got up and started for the bedroom. "We must call the Major right away."

David caught up with her at the door. "Wait a bit, honey. I don't see what you're driving at. Erica may be a German. But that isn't a criminal matter. And you haven't a speck of evidence to prove there is anything wrong with Steve. It's preposterous."

"But she knew about the oil business. She was the only one who knew there was a case at all. Don't you remember, Mr. Brook told us that the first day we came? He was quite upset about it, too."

"Just the same," David insisted stubbornly, "that doesn't make her a traitor. Either to the country or to Brook. You have to make out a better case against her than that." He put his hands in his pockets and paced up and down the room, thinking. There might be something in it. Cassius had intimated that Andrea's hint on how the oil was actually being stolen had been acted on and found to be correct. She did have an uncanny instinct . . . "And Ann has to do some explaining herself. Why she fainted, for example, when I said Wade was murdered. As for Steve . . ."

A knock had sounded at the door and Judith's voice said anxiously, "Mrs. Ramsay? Andy?" When the door was opened, "I'm so glad you haven't gone to bed yet. I must tell Cassius something right away." Her lips were shaking, and Andrea took hold of her arm. "I'm all right," trying to smile. "But I must tell him about Steve." She told them in detail of her conversation with Cassius that noon, and about Judge Tay-

lor's informing her this evening that Herbert's will never had been changed. "He sent notes to the Judge, as Cassius suspected, but the will never was signed. So I still get the money."

Andrea broke in impatiently, "You mean you really stole that brief-case? Or tried to? What a crummy thing to do. And what about Steve? If you know anything that will clear up all these mysteries, I think you should tell right away. You've made enough trouble."

Judith said defensively, "I didn't mean to destroy the will, if that is what you are insinuating. But how would you feel to have the money you'd always been led to suspect belonged to you willed to a couple of kids? And unjustly at that. As for Steve . . ." She coloured under Andrea's accusing eyes. "Even thieves are supposed to have a bit of honour, you know. I admired his nerve, coming here bold as brass and carrying things off the way he did. I expected to tell him shortly that I knew all about him and that he would have to go away. But as long as he wasn't doing any harm that I could see—and I knew Sally didn't care anything about him, so she wouldn't be hurt—there didn't seem to be any reason for me to squeal on him."

David said impatiently, "Squeal about what? And if you told Cassius that you knew something about Steve that was to his discredit, I should have thought he'd have made you explain."

"He was too interested in Sally to think clearly," Judith muttered. "Not that I would have explained, no matter what he said." She poured a glass of brandy and gulped it down eagerly, as if needing the courage she hoped it would give to her. "Steve isn't Steve, that's all. He can't be," seeing their incredulous looks. "Steve lost one of his eyes a long time ago. Herbert told me so. He wore a glass one, an imitation but so good that you could hardly tell it. It wasn't apparent at a glance, anyway."

"But Steve has no glass eye!" Andrea exclaimed.

"Of course not," Judith said shrilly. "That's just it, don't you understand? Both of his eyes are all right. The night I

arrived I saw the pupils dilate at sight of me. I thought his eyes were black until I saw them next day in the light. I knew then something was wrong." Her voice rose sharply. "But now with Wade dead . . . Steve isn't Steve Carstair. Who is he ? And where is the real Steve ? "

CHAPTER XX

"IT may be a false scent," David said thoughtfully to Cassius, who had come at once to the Brook home on receipt of his telephone call. "But I can't believe it. It fits in too nicely, like the missing pieces of a puzzle. Captain Henry is looking into it right away."

They were sitting in Robert's study with drinks and smokes at their elbows, waiting for the Captain to bring Steve back with him for questioning.

"Steve may not come for questioning willingly," Robert said heavily, putting into words the thing Andrea had been thinking.

"He'll come voluntarily, if he's as smart as I think him," Cassius said confidently. "It would look too much like a confession if he should refuse." He looked pityingly across the room at Robert, sitting with his head on his hand, staring into the fire. What is he seeing in the flames, he wondered, knowing what he himself would be seeing were he in Robert's place and Sally in Erica's.

Andrea said quietly, "Would you rather we didn't stay, Major ? " She looked at Judy and Sally, sitting with clasped hands on the sofa, and at Ann, curled up in a big chair on the other side of the fire. Only Erica, unknowing, was in her room and supposedly asleep. It had been the Captain's idea that she was not to be told anything until Steve had been questioned and

confronted by Judith. Then Erica was to be brought down and questioned in turn.

"She'll break if she's taken unawares," he said.

"It doesn't seem as if she's given much of a chance," Robert said miserably.

"Wade wasn't given any, either," Captain Henry reminded him.

Long silences fell when the slightest movement of any one of the group sounded loud and embarrassing. The clock on the mantel ticked away the minutes; the fire snapped and crackled and once Robert leaned down and dropped on another log. A shower of sparks shot up, illuminating the drawn look on Judith's face, the tension of Sally's clenched hands, and the indecision on Andrea's frowning countenance. She was far from satisfied with the assumption of the police that the discovery of Steve's being an impostor—if he actually were—was the answer to all their troubles.

"I wish he'd come and get it over with," Judith muttered uneasily. She dropped her eyes before her father's reproachful look. If she had only told her suspicions of Steve before . . .

Another half-hour passed. The door bell rang and Jason went to answer it. They heard his feet shuffling rapidly across the tiled loggia floor. He came back almost at once, accompanied by other rapid steps.

Jason rapped on the study door. In answer to Robert's gruff "Come in," he opened it and stepped inside, pushing it shut behind him. "It's the police, Sir, Mister Robert. Captain Henry and . . ."

"Send them in," Robert ordered wearily. "And bring another decanter of Scotch and more soda. Then don't come in again unless I ring for you, no matter what you hear. Understand?"

"Yes, Mister Robert." Jason, like other family servants, had an instinct for knowing when anything was going badly with the Brooks. He shook his head as he stood aside to admit the visitors.

Captain Henry stalked in, followed by Hunter, his round face more solemn than it had any right to be if they were, as his chief had believed, on the point of solving the case. Steve was not with them.

Robert said questioningly, "Where is Steve? You didn't book him, after all? You gave me your word that you would question him first. His father was my best friend. It seems sacrilege to allow even the shadow of a doubt such as this to touch his son."

"I tell you he isn't Steve!" Judith exclaimed. "He's an impostor! He has both his eyes and the real Steve didn't."

Captain Henry nodded his head. "I'm sure she's right about it, sir." He went across to the radio and without asking permission twirled the dials. After a second a hoarse voice sounded . . . "Calling all cars! Calling all cars! Be on the lookout for man answering to the name of Steven Carstairs, address Hotel Roosevelt. Last seen last night at seven o'clock carrying a light coloured pigs skin brief-case. Also a heavy alligator skin bag with the initials S. C. on the side in black letters. Light hair, grey eyes, deeply tanned, no scars, no marks of identification. Wearing brown suit, brown hat, brown shoes. Wanted for questioning in Wade Harlow murder case. Anyone having information will communicate with Police Headquarters. We repeat. All Cars! Be on the lookout . . ." The Captain snapped the switch and the voice ceased.

David said incredulously, "You mean he isn't home?"

"Gone! Skipped! Vamoosed!" Captain Henry sat down and looked angrily about him at the staring, puzzled faces. "None of you gave him any hint of this, I suppose? Well," as no one answered, "he scented it coming and has cleared out. Bag and baggage. But he won't get far," he added grimly.

"I can't believe it," Robert groaned.

Andrea said, "Then you found nothing. But you said 'Wade Harlow murder!'" She slopped a little of the Scotch and soda from her glass on the waxed surface of the mahogany table

beside her and looked frantically about for something with which to wipe it up so it would not mar the surface. She couldn't find her handkerchief in the excitement and was about to ask David for his when Norman Mandel, sitting white-faced and shaking beside her, shoved his into her hand. "Thanks!" she inuttered, wiping up the pool of liquor. "I'll have this washed and returned to you."

"Don't bother," the boy said gruffly, his lips still quivering. He took it from her hand and stuffed it back into his pocket. As he pulled it from her grasp, something sharp caught at her finger, and she sucked it instinctively while listening to Captain Henry who had interpreted her exclamation as an opportunity to explain to the group generally about the findings of the toxicologist.

"Aconitine. Doc says if the dose was large enough, a man would die almost instantly from paralysis of the heart. Says probably the syringe was filled with the drug and Mr. Harlow hardly knew anything had happened to him. It would be that quick."

Judith said faintly, "That's from a plant—aconite, isn't it, Captain? The natives use it a lot in the East to commit suicide because it doesn't leave any traces, or practically none, that could be determined as chemical proof."

"That's what Doc said. Easy matter to jab a hypodermic needle into a man if he has his back turned to you, and let him have it."

"Ghastly!" Andrea said, rubbing the small cut on her finger. It still tingled and smarted, like a scratch from glass. "It doesn't seem possible that Steve could strike Wade down in cold blood. Steve's so alive. I can't believe it."

"You mean he had a lot of charm," the Captain said bluntly. "So have many murderers." He turned to Robert reluctantly, "I'm afraid I'll have to see Miss Lange, sir."

Robert looked at him dully but made no move to send for her.

Sally said pleadingly, "Oh, no, Captain Henry. Surely she

need not be told until morning. She hasn't been feeling well lately, I know. She's been taking sleeping pills because she's rested so badly. She can't get away. I'll be responsible for her appearance at Police Headquarters in the morning."

"I'm sorry, Miss Sally. But I'll have to take her downtown with me now. I can't question her here."

Norman said hoarsely, "You want to torture her. To give her your third degree. I know. Lights, and beatings with rubber hose so that the marks don't show. And questions over and over until the poor girl confesses to anything in order to escape. Why don't you take the guilty person? Why don't you take me?" He was hysterical with fear.

The Captain ignored him completely. He nodded to Hunter, who said apologetically to Sally, "If you please, Miss? I'd rather you went up with me than one of the servants. I'm sure Miss Lange would prefer it."

"Go with him, Sally," Robert said brokenly. To the Captain, "May I see her first, alone?"

Cassius said sharply, "Of course you may. She's not arrested, Robert. They only want to ask her some questions. You must admit, old man, that she hasn't been quite on the level with us about Steve."

"I can't believe it." Robert looked old and broken. But he still retained his dignity. "Take Erica into the library, Sally. I'll be waiting for her there. I'm accompanying her to the station, of course."

"I think not, Robert," Cassius said firmly. "I'll telephone Judge Taylor to go with her and to look out for her interests. The Captain won't object to that." There was firmness in his tone as he addressed Captain Henry, also.

The Captain agreed somewhat sulkily. "Although you only make it harder for everyone in the end. Nobody gives anybody the third degree in these days. That's some more mystery story stuff." He added angrily, "That's what comes of people not telling all they know. Mrs. Seldon, Mrs. Ann Seldon could have saved us all a lot of trouble if she'd been willing to talk.

Was she? Not so you could notice it," glaring at Ann, who remained motionless and silent. "Well, she'll talk now. She's going to follow Miss Lange down to headquarters and no fooling. I'm running this show from now on."

CHAPTER XXI

ERICA returned to Palmetto Walk early the next morning while the family was at breakfast. She appeared in the doorway, calm and unsmiling, with Judge Taylor apparently serene and grave standing behind her.

Robert went to her at once and took her in his arms before his children and his guests. What he had said to her the night before in the library, when the police were waiting to take her down for questioning, nobody knew. He led her to a seat beside him and gently removed the turban bound about her hair.

"Don't talk about it until you've had your breakfast. You need never talk about it if you prefer not to."

Judge Taylor said dryly, "Don't be an ass, Robert. Of course she has to talk about it. If she'd told you or me or any one of us before now, she wouldn't be in such a mess." He straightened his tie and sighed deeply. "Now she'll have to go on the stand and nothing you or I or anyone else can do will save her from a mighty mean ordeal."

"I don't care about myself any more," Erica said brokenly. Her blue eyes swam with tears and she lifted her hand and brushed them away impatiently. "I thought my old life was over and done with—that I could start over, make a new beginning, and the old wouldn't matter." She shook her blonde head sorrowfully. "I was wrong. One must pay for one's sins. You can't buy happiness at another's expense. It never works out."

Jason came in and poured the coffee and left the room again. After he had gone, Andrea asked softly if there were anything she could do.

"Wouldn't you like to come to my room and lie down for a while? David is going down to the office to finish up his work and I wouldn't bother you, but I'd be there so you wouldn't feel alone." Not that I'm going to pry, she told herself, but once she really breaks she's going to talk and there are a lot of things I'd like to know about Steve.

"You are kind," Erica said, obediently swallowing the coffee Robert urged her to take. "Food is Robert's panacea for all ills." But she ate a little of the egg and bacon he placed on her plate and gradually colour returned to her cheeks and lips. She thought about Andrea's invitation and repeated again her gratitude for Andrea's kindness. "But I think I'll lie down in my own room, if you don't mind."

Sally said that she wondered what the police had learned from Ann? "She knew something she hadn't told."

Judge Taylor said quietly, "I shouldn't tell you this, but the case is unusual, so much so that I feel I am not giving away anything to which the police could take exception. But Ann told me yesterday what she knew and asked my advice about telling the police. I stayed with her at the station until she made a statement and signed it."

"Last night, you mean?"

The Judge inclined his head gravely. "Yes. I advised her yesterday to go at once, but she couldn't bring herself to do so. Last evening she no longer had a choice."

Robert said, "What did Ann know? And why was she afraid to tell? Because I presume it was fear. Of Steve?"

"Of Steve. She saw him borrow the tools with which he sharpened the sword-blade that Erica used to invoke her incantations and with which she scratched Wade during the performance. He came to call one day, bringing her some of those moth orchids of which he was so fond, and he took Jack's file and whetstone away with him. He didn't know she saw

him, but after Wade was hurt she remembered the incident. Apparently it hadn't bothered her much at the time. She isn't a curious-minded person, you know. But then she was certain Steve had used the tools for the purpose of sharpening the sword-blade and when he came to see her another day something in her manner must have told him her suspicions, because he warned her by using veiled threats against the child. When her worst fears were confirmed and she heard David say that Wade really had been murdered, she was frightened out of her wits. Jack is her life. I need not tell you that."

"Poor Ann," Judith said with a sigh.

Robert's face was lined and grey but peaceful. He made up his mind last night to take Erica anyway, on any terms, no matter what she had done, Andrea decided, noticing how his eyes followed Erica's every movement. She said aloud, "But I don't understand why Steve, who apparently isn't Steve at all but somebody else, did it? Was it money?" She had been about to mention the stolen oil, and bit her lip at her near slip.

Erica nodded. "Yes, indeed. A great deal of money, too. His half-brother, the real Steve Carstair, was Herbert Seldon's friend. I met him, also, when I was playing in a dive in Manila." Colour came into her pale cheeks. "I hadn't been long over from Germany then and I had little money. The real Steve was very good to me. He bought me clothes and presents and helped me to get a better job. He had a great deal of influence. In no time at all I was a success. Not like the success I had in New York with the revival of *The Black Crook*, but enough so that I had become a person." She stopped and took a swallow from her cup.

"This person, the real Steve's half-brother, didn't inherit any money, then?" David interrupted to ask.

"His name is Leonard and he was an illegitimate child. His mother was a half-caste, I think, and the real Steve felt very badly about it when he learned the facts. He gave Leonard a generous allowance on condition that he drop the name of Carstair, and I imagine he did for a time. But he used to follow

Steve about, partly to annoy him and partly to get him to pay up his debts. He kept bad company, too, and this worried Steve a lot. Leonard frequented all the worst dives in Manila, especially those run by Japs. Trying to get Leonard out of a brawl in one of those places, Steve lost his right eye. Herbert Seldon was much concerned over that and I think must have told Judy about it."

Judith nodded. "He did."

"As soon as I met Leonard here the first night I came, I was fearfully worried. I knew Steve had left the Islands. I had no idea what had happened to Leonard. I wanted to bury all the past. Start a new life for myself. And then to have him turn up when Robert and I . . ." She choked and put her hand to her throat as if it hurt her.

Sally got up impulsively from her place at the table and hurried around to her. She put her arm about her and Erica turned and buried her face on the girl's shoulder. "Don't you worry about it any longer," Sally told her stoutly. "You just forget all about it. We're going to. As soon as they find Steve, I mean Leonard, he'll be made to pay for what he did and then we can settle down in peace."

Robert said huskily, "You're a good girl, Sally."

David said to Erica, "What was the package you gave to Leonard, Miss Lange? Cassius told me you gave him something and said he wasn't to bother you any more, or something of the sort."

"It was Jackie's tools. I found them in his dressing-room the night Wade was killed. He had hidden them in a crack behind the dressing-table. We had changed dressing-rooms, you remember. He made me get the tools for him. I told him it was the last thing I would do," Erica said with spirit. "He swore by all the gods that he had nothing to do with Wade's death. And I was forced to believe him. Then, when it was determined that Wade really was murdered, I was certain Leonard had done it."

"Norman will be glad to find you're back home," Robert

said with a smile. "He felt so badly last night when Captain Henry insisted on taking you to the station. He screamed that he had done it himself, thinking such a foolish statement would help you, poor lad."

Erica was touched. "I must see him later, after I've rested a bit, and thank him."

Robert nodded. "Do. He has the day off. We all have, as a matter of fact. I didn't have the heart to go down to business, knowing that all the papers are carrying huge headlines about Leonard." He smiled faintly. "I can't get used to calling him that. He was likeable."

"Very," David said, rising to his feet. "I'll be plugging along, I guess. If they hear anything of him," he added, turning to his wife, "I wish you'd give me a ring. Cassius said he'd keep me informed, too."

Andrea followed him to the door and lifted her face for his kiss. "I feel a bit badly, somehow, about Steve . . . Leonard."

"He's a murderer, dear. Don't waste your sympathy on him. Don't go running around by yourslef, either. I'll be home early. What are you going to do to-day?"

"Nothing much, I guess."

David started down the path to the walk, then turned back uncertainly and took Andrea again into his arms. "Don't do anything foolish, sweet. Somehow I have a feeling I shouldn't leave you this morning."

Andrea gave him a little push. "Hurry up and finish that job, will you, darling? Cassius will let you go most any time, now. And we don't have to stay for the trial. The Captain said if necessary we could come down again, but he thought all we'd have to do would be to make statements." She added as an after-thought, "Did you send any flowers to the hospital for Slim?"

"Yes, but it was only a polite gesture. He isn't conscious as yet."

Andrea watched until he passed from sight. Then she went slowly back into the house and closed the door. So many things still remained unanswered.

CHAPTER XXII

THE day dragged slowly along. At cocktail time the nerves of all the household were frayed and raw, and the individuals avoided each other as far as was possible. News from the hospital was encouraging, although the physicians held out little hope for Slim's identification of his assailant even after he was fully conscious. It would be many days before he would be in a condition to be questioned, and he might not know anything then as the blow indicated by its position that he probably had been struck from behind. There was no news at all about the impostor known as Steve Carstair.

Andrea felt she could bear the strain no longer. She knocked at Robert's study door and went in without waiting for his invitation. "Let's have cocktails on the terrace, or better still, in the bayou-garden? I know I'm presuming, but everything seems so gloomy maybe we'd feel better if we all got together and talked things over. This keeping matters bottled up is bad."

"Of course you're not presuming," Robert said warmly. "I don't know of anyone who has a better right to suggest things than you. I agree that it is a mistake for us to act this way, too. Ask Jason to mix the drinks, will you, and tell the houseman to take chairs to the twin-oaks. That corner is shielded from the wind." He added curiously, "Why do you prefer the bayou-garden to the terrace?"

"More romantic."

Robert laughed outright and some of the tired lines left his face. "I keep forgetting you're still a bride."

Andrea dimpled. "So do I. Part of the time."

A short time later the household was settled with drinks and canapés beneath the huge oaks that formed a green canopy over the corner of the bayou-garden. In the later afternoon light it looked even more unkempt and neglected than it had the night David and she had walked there in the moonlight and sat down on one of the benches to discuss the case and their having been

herrings for the Major and his associates—the FBI. Still, it was romantic. Andrea gave a sigh of satisfaction and stretched out in the deck chair, more at ease than she had been at any time in the past twenty-four hours.

“Feeling better?” she asked Erica, who sat opposite, looking cool and summery in a thin organdy that left bare the exquisite column of her throat. Norman sat on the grass at her feet, his fair head almost touching her hand; once or twice he leaned back so that his cheek brushed her fingers like a caress and Andrea noticed that she moved them as if the touch had scorched her. “Headaches are such a nuisance.”

“I’m rested.”

Andrea thought her eyes were wary and she wondered about it for a minute. “Mr. Brook,” with a smile at the watching Robert, “agreed with me that it would be better for us all if we openly discussed anything about the case that was bothering us. Keeping things shut up in our minds is not good.”

Norman said disagreeably, “I suppose you consider yourself an authority, Mrs. Ramsay? I didn’t know you were a psychiatrist.”

“I’m not.” Andrea refused to allow herself to be annoyed. “But my father is a doctor and I worked for a long time in a sanitarium. Even the most dense person is bound to assimilate some knowledge from the contacts he makes.”

Sally said pertly, “If I contact Captain Henry a lot, Andy, do you think I will assimilate any knowledge?”

Judith said after the laughter had died down, “I’m sure you will, puss. But we won’t mention the kind of knowledge.”

The tension was lessened appreciably, and the banter became easier and more widespread. Warren Sand, who had brought some papers from the office for Robert to sign, stretched out at Andrea’s feet, with his hat tipped forward over his eyes to keep out the rays of the sun.

“This is something like,” he murmured drowsily. “Where is Ramsay? Don’t tell me he’s still a prey to work!”

"He's coming down the path now," Ann volunteered. "And look at the size of the candy-box he's carrying!"

David grinned cheerfully. He dropped the candy on to his hostess's lap, and accepted the cocktail Judith hastened to pour for him. "Nice and cool here," he said, sitting down by Lawrence Lannon. "It was downright stuffy downtown. Any news?"

Andrea told him the latest word from the hospital about Slim. "Not that it will do any good for a long time, probably. But at least he isn't going to die. His mother was here this morning. She cried for joy, poor woman."

"Slim won't be able to work for a while," Robert said. "I'll have to be looking for a substitute secretary, I suppose. I dislike the idea of breaking in a new one, too."

"Why don't you let me help you, Dad?" Sally said eagerly. "I need something to occupy my mind."

"That's an idea, honey," Robert said promptly. "I can get a typist to do the rough work and you can handle the reports."

Leonard's name hadn't been mentioned, but David brought up the subject abruptly.

"About our Steve," he said. "How did he get hold of the real Steve's money? Nobody has explained that to me yet. And why did Leonard come here looking for a job? That is what happened, isn't it?"

Robert's face sobered. "That's my fault, David. I wrote and suggested that he come to the States for a visit. Leonard apparently found the letter among his half-brother's papers and answered it. He said he was tired of the Islands and was anxious to get taken into some business here, so I offered him a job."

"But what became of the real Steve? Erica says he 'disappeared,' but apparently she doesn't know where. He may have been killed, too."

"That seems to be Cassius's idea. He told me so last night," Robert explained. "Leonard looked enough like his half-

brother so that anyone writing back to Manila about him wouldn't notice the discrepancy in their appearance. He couldn't do anything about the eye business, but he trusted to luck on it and it went back on him. He doubtless practised his brother's handwriting until he could forge his signature well enough to get the bank to pass his checks."

Andrea, most of the questions that had bothered her now answered, rose and strolled indolently from one plant to another, examining the delicate foliage of some unknown shrub, the exotic fragrance of a flowering vine. She wandered farther and farther away from the others, the shells of the winding paths crunching beneath her sandals. In the distance she could hear the tinkle of water falling into a basin and hastened her steps. She had wanted to see the fountain; it was certain to be tiled, and she was interested in old designs.

She rounded a corner of the tall shrubbery and the fountain lay before her, tiled as she had imagined in stark black and white design. Water spurted lazily from the slender figure done in bronze, from the fish standing on their tails at her feet, and dropped down again into the pool where lilies grew in a wild and tangled mass in the water.

Andrea leaned down and plucked a lily from its stem and, holding it in her hand and occasionally sniffing its faint scent, strolled to the other side of the pool. She thought she'd see where the enchanting path led that wandered lonesomely into a clump of blossoming shrubs. She stepped over a dead branch that lay across the shells and then remained still, one foot raised in the air. She had almost stepped on a brown hand that was half-hidden by the drooping fronds of a passion vine. She moved her foot back mechanically, knowing what she would find when she pushed aside the creepers. Leonard's face, a smile curving his lips, his eyes looking up at the darkening sky! A wine-glass had fallen from his fingers; it was unbroken and a few drops of liquid glinted in the bottom. His bag was shoved into the shrubbery, but of the brief-case there was no trace.

Andrea backed out on to the grass-plot and looked dully about her. The light shone on something that glittered among the blades of grass. She touched one of the specks and thought it felt like bits of glass, but she saw nothing from which it could have come. A brownish-white spot near Leonard's body also caught her attention. She leaned closer for another look and saw it was one of the moth orchids of which he was so fond. The turf was trampled nearby, as if he'd paced up and down before drinking the poison. It didn't occur to Andrea that this wasn't a suicide. She accepted it as such immediately, and in spite of the fact that the impostor probably was a murderer, she was glad.

CHAPTER XXIII

"**N**OW we can go home," Andrea said thankfully the next morning. She folded David's pyjamas and laid them neatly in his bag. "I don't know when I've been so pleased." She looked across at David standing at the window. "What are you looking at, dear?"

"The theatre. Strange how it mixed up so many lives, isn't it?"

"It wasn't the fault of the theatre. The revival of the show was just an excuse for Steve . . . Leonard, I mean, to kill Wade. Where in heaven's name do you suppose he hid the brief-case? Not that it makes much difference now. We know what the papers must have been—the proof of his being an impostor. Herbert Seldon must have gotten wise to it, or thought he did, and had some sort of an investigation started. Wade found the papers among those sent on to him when the settlement of Herbert's estate came up. No wonder he was excited."

"I suppose so." David's tone was flat and his wife glanced at him curiously.

"You're not satisfied with the solution of the case, are you?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Your manner," Andrea said uncertainly. "The solution doesn't seem right to me, either. Yesterday, when I found the body, I was sure Leonard had committed suicide and that everything was okay. To-day, after sleeping on it, I'm not so sure."

"What do you think is wrong?" David asked.

Andrea closed his bag. "Things that don't tie up. Where was Sally the night Wade died? She made chocolate for us, true, but she'd been somewhere before then, I'm positive. She had on street clothes. There was no reason for her to change into them from the dress she wore at *The Black Crook* rehearsal. It would have been more natural to have changed into a house gown. And who was the man she saw at the foot of the balcony stairs? She didn't make up that story. And who left the house door open? Then we come back to Steve's . . . I mean Leonard's . . . suicide. It was too easy."

"I agree he wasn't the type," David admitted. "But you said yourself last night that you thought it was suicide. And if the police have accepted it as such, it is foolish of us to question it." He chewed his lip thoughtfully. "Cassius isn't satisfied, either," he said finally.

"He wouldn't be. I told you before that he is clever. Much more so than Captain Henry. I still don't know if I like Cassius, but I admire his tenacity."

"The Jap who ran the orchid farm where Leonard got the moth orchids has identified the body as that of the man from whom he got his orders. The FBI hinted at a lighter sentence, so he has turned state's evidence. Even if Joe Burns, the Youba Oil Company engineer, doesn't confess, as he hasn't yet, nor has the superintendent who must have been in cahoots with the oil gang, the Jap's statement proves that Leonard was mixed up with the stolen oil. He probably was the go-between, getting

word from the tankers in some unknown manner as to when they would be in to refuel. He passed it on to Leonard and was told when to tie up at the Youba landing. The engineer and superintendent, together with the connivance of some of the guards, did the refuelling after dark. By the way, nobody has explained to me how you came to tumble to the way in which they got the water into the tanks."

Andrea said contritely, "I wanted to tell you as soon as I thought of how it might be done, but Cassius was so insistent I should not repeat it to a soul, that I didn't want to go against his orders. He wouldn't let you tell me about the hypodermic mark on Wade's shoulder, either."

David nodded. "But what made you think of it? I'm a man, and it never would have occurred to me that the engineer might simply reverse the pumping and force water back into the tanks. It was so simple that it was almost fool-proof."

"I know. That's what the FBI said. He hooked up the water line to the oil line and shut them away from each other with a valve under the pump house floor. After he'd pumped the oil into the tankers it was a cinch to close the oil valve and open the water line which led through a by-pass pipe back into the main oil pipe above the oil valve. The pressure of the water forced the oil back and the water in. We used to have a pump at home that worked that way. We pumped water from a cistern up into the tank at the top of the house. It works the same way here in the bathroom. That's how I came to think of it."

"Smart girl," David said admiringly. "Well, we'll never know the whole story. The engineer needed money, of course, at least that's the reason usually given. We'd never have gotten the Jap if it hadn't been for Leonard's passion for orchids."

"One of the orchids lay near the body when I found it."

"Cassius isn't satisfied about that, either. He thinks someone else found the body first. Erica, maybe. Or Judith."

Andrea shook her head. "I'm sure they didn't. But let's forget it. I'm so glad to be going home that I could turn

handsprings." She snapped open her overnight bag and winced as the lock bruised her sore finger.

"What ails your hand?" David looked at the angry red scratch.

"I cut it." She told him how she had spilled her drink on the table and borrowed Norman's handkerchief with which to clean it up. "He must have had a thorn or a piece of glass in his pocket and it caught on his handkerchief. I intended to look, but he grabbed it away from me so quickly I didn't get a chance."

David said in a tight voice, "Did you say glass?"

"Why, yes. It looks like a glass cut. Why?"

"You found some glass splinters on the grass beside Leonard's body that you couldn't account for, didn't you? He didn't wear eye-glasses. The glass he drank from was unbroken. Suppose somebody had been there with him, drinking, and that Leonard had intended to get rid of that person by poisoning him and had the glasses switched on him when his back was turned. He might have dropped the glass and it broke. What would you think of that?"

"Norman!" Andrea whispered. "He left his own glass and took the broken one away in his pocket. He threw away the big pieces, but the splinters stuck to his handkerchief. He might have dropped the orchid, too. He was always picking up dead flowers and things of Erica's. And that would account for her handkerchief over Slim's face." She followed David, who had run to the door. "Where are you going?"

David was half-way down the stairs. "To get the police."

The train for the north left at midnight. The Ramseys made their way down the aisle, followed by a porter carrying their bags. He accepted the generous tip David gave him with a broad smile and departed.

Andrea made ready for bed in silence. She felt drained of all desire to talk about the case, partly because she was emotionally exhausted by the excitement and partly because she was still pondering unexplained episodes in her mind.

Captain Henry had taken Norman away, screaming every vile name he could think of. Bits of glass had been found in his pocket, but they were not necessary to prove his guilt, as he had confessed freely, his nerves cracking from the strain. He had been entirely under Leonard's guidance ever since the impostor had come to the country. At his bidding he had helped with the oil deals, stolen the brief-case—which had been found hidden in his room—because Leonard knew it must contain information that would prove his identity. Slim he had tried to kill because Norman thought he had become suspicious. Asked why he had helped Leonard, he'd admitted it was because he wanted money to buy real jewels for Erica. His father hated China, too, he'd said, because it had killed his mother.

"They killed her," he'd shrieked. "Chinese dogs! If they had surrendered peacefully, mother would have been alive to-day."

David broke the silence. "Mind if I talk about the case a bit, honey?"

Andrea, stretched comfortably in the berth, shook her head. "Not now. I have most of it straight, I think."

"Well, I haven't. It's clear enough about Leonard, of course. The papers in the brief-case show that he shoved the real Steve over a cliff, then brazenly went home and pretended to be his half-brother. He took possession of the real Steve's bank account, stocks, clothes, and so on. But he couldn't explain away the fact that he had two good eyes and Steve had a glass one. So he took advantage of Mr. Brook's letter and came to America. Norman says Leonard was thoroughly bad. He says he intended to marry Sally and after that he felt he would be safe, with all the Brook money and prestige behind him, no matter what happened."

"I suppose Leonard intended to poison Norman, the same as he did Wade Harlow, except that he put the poison for Norman in a cocktail. Norman said Leonard intended to kill Wade by putting poison on the sword-stick blade and thus throwing the

blame on Erica, but when he found out at dinner that Wade had papers that would prove he was an impostor, he didn't dare take any chances on Wade's not dying from a light dose. So he stuck him in the back with the hypodermic, jabbed it through the rope dangling from the pulley, and gave it a yank which sent it up to the roof. Easy, wasn't it?"

David said thoughtfully, "Yes, it was. And clever, too. But if Ann Seldon had told about Leonard's stealing Jackie's tools we'd have gotten things straightened out much sooner."

"You can't blame her too much, dear," Andrea said. "She was frightened that Leonard might harm her son. That's only natural."

"I suppose he took them because they couldn't be traced. If Leonard had bought tools downtown someone might have remembered it later." David added, "I suppose Norman was the one Sally saw in the garden and either he or Judith left the door open?"

"Yes. Not that it matters now. What will they do to Norman, David?"

"Shut him up in a sanitarium for life, probably. The Major says there is no doubt about it. That punishment is much worse than death, I think."

The train gathered speed. Its whistle sounded for a crossing. Andrea shivered at the sound. "Lonely," she said.

David pulled her into his arms. He laid his cheek against her hair. "I'm glad we're going home."

After a long time Andrea asked sleepily, "Where had Sally been that night in her street clothes? The night she made chocolate for us?"

David chuckled. "She told me she'd gone out to the corner tobacconist to telephone to Lawrence Lannon. She didn't want anyone to hear her. I suppose she was jealous of Judy, as a matter of fact. Oh, well," snuggling down under the covers, "maybe we helped a bit after all. The Major says so. Like him any better?"

"I'll tell you later," Andrea said, stifling a yawn. "I hope